

The Mystery of Aura

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The Mystery of Aura

by [skylightsparkle](#)

Summary

Small things can bring big changes. While visiting Cameron Palace, Pikachu goes missing, and Ash, along with his friends and a mysterious pokemon named Lucario, go on a quest to find him. Along the way, Ash discovers things about himself that could change his entire life.

AU Novelization of Lucario and the Mystery of Mew.

Notes

See the end of the work for [notes](#)

Welcome Back



It was a beautiful day; the sun was shining brightly, the bright blue sky dotted with white, puffy clouds, the air warm and comfortable. It was the kind of day that could make anyone excited, but to say that Pokemon Trainer Ash Ketchum was excited would be a huge understatement, and it wasn't because of the weather.

His dark brown eyes were wide, and he had to contain himself from sprinting across the old, stone bridge that they were (much too slowly, in his opinion) walking across. He had half a mind to push the oddly-dressed people out of the way, some of them taking too long to get anywhere.

"Ash, calm down," Brock Slate, a tall young man with tanned skin and dark hair, called out to him. "I know you're excited for the tournament, but we've got plenty of time."

"He's been acting like a hyperactive Spink since we left the last Pokemon Center," a small boy with dark blue hair and dark brown eyes said dryly, fixing the glasses on his face as they walked. Though still not old enough to be an actual Pokemon Trainer, Max Maple was full to the brim with knowledge on different Pokemon.

"This is a once in a lifetime competition," his elder sister, a brunette named May Maple, pointed out happily as she looked around at all of the unique costumes around them. The Pokemon Coordinator couldn't see two costumes exactly the same. "Look at how everyone's dressed."

"It's not once in a lifetime," Max argued. "It happens once a year." He looked around at everyone else they passed by. "Still, we don't have costumes."

Brock, who always seemed to have a travel guide for whatever area they were in, flipped through the small booklet in his hands on Cameron Palace. He'd always wanted to come and see it, but the last time he traveled around Kanto, Ash was 10-years-old and had a serious one-track mind about competing in the Indigo League (not that things really changed all that much). They had enough side adventures at the time anyway. "It says here that we can get costumes in the palace."

Where Ash would have normally bounced around happily at that, his eyes continued to scan the area in front of him. Pikachu, his ever loyal friend, was perched on his shoulder, looking just as excited as he was. The competition in the palace would have normally been enough to excite him,

and it would later, but the 13, almost 14-year-old, was too distracted by something else at the moment, causing him to accidentally bump into other people from time to time.

"Seriously, Ash, what's with you?" May demanded after having to apologize to yet another person that he bumped into and ignored. She was normally a sweet girl, but when she got mad, her temper came out like an explosion.

Ash glanced back at the younger girl, about to answer when Pikachu suddenly perked up on his shoulder. He grabbed a hold of Ash's hat, straightening up, and pointed. "Pikachu!"

The boy swung away from his traveling partners, looking around eagerly until he finally saw who was looking for the entire time. A laugh escaped his lips, and he darted forward. "Misty!"

"Misty?" Brock, May and Max repeated behind him, all equally confused until they saw a flash of bright orange hair held back in a side ponytail.

Ash ignored them, pushing himself through the crowd to the spot on the bridge where his friend was waiting. She was leaning against the stone railing, her sea green eyes staring out at the beautiful forest around Cameron Palace, jumping when a yellow face suddenly appeared right in front of her. A split second later, she realized who it was, and had to reach out quickly to stop him from pitching off the side, down the long drop to the ground below. "Sorry Pikachu! You startled me!"

"Hey Misty!" Ash said happily as he came to a stop at her side, the grin on his face and the excitement in his eyes telling the girl that he was honestly happy to see her.

"It's been a while, hasn't it?" Misty asked him as she hugged Pikachu to her, the yellow mouse cooing happily as he nuzzled into the short, yellow shirt that she wore over her tight red one. "Been staying out of trouble?"

"I call you almost every time we get to a Pokemon Center," Ash said while rolling his dark eyes, though his grin had yet to fade. "It hasn't been that long." He purposely ignored her second question.

"I meant since we saw each other face to face, numbskull," Misty said with a dramatic sigh. "I see nothing's changed there."

"Oh come on, it was only a few months ago. It's not my fault Daisy can't understand that she can't just hand gym badges out," Ash replied, referring to when Misty had to head back to Cerulean City when he was just starting his adventure to face the Kanto Battle Frontier. At the time, he was honestly hoping that she would be able to stay with them on their trip around Kanto, because it would be easy for her to get back home in case of an emergency, but it wasn't meant to be. His eyes softened a bit and he said, "I'm glad you could come here though."

"Daisy insisted that I go, and I'm confident enough in her at least that she can handle the gym for a few days," Misty said with a nod. "Besides, I've always wanted to see Cameron Palace."

"Misty!" They both jumped as May seemed to materialize from behind Ash. The younger girl was grinning broadly as she said, "I didn't know you were coming!"

"None of us did," Brock added as he and Max caught up, staring at Ash suspiciously. "Though I get the feeling that you did."

"You mean you spent hours bothering my sisters so that they would let me come, and didn't tell them?" Misty asked Ash suspiciously as Pikachu climbed from her arms back onto his trainer's

shoulder.

Ash laughed weakly rubbing the back of his head with his hand, Pikachu copying the motion for some reason. "I didn't spend hours bothering them."

"Three different Pokemon Centers," she said, holding up three fingers. "And you spent at least an hour each time bothering them. What did you even say to Daisy? She was practically shoving me out the door and seemed both horrified and impressed for some reason. Says she suddenly has a little more respect for you, and that makes me really, really suspicious."

"Nothing," he said a little more quickly than he should have, letting everyone know that he was lying. "I mean, it's not like I had any blackmail that Tracey accidentally let slip. And I definitely wouldn't use it." They all stared at him with disbelief, and he asked, "What?"

"You tried to blackmail someone?" May asked, raising an eyebrow at him.

"You tried to blackmail my sister?" Misty added.

"Given that Misty's here, you successfully blackmailed her sister?" Max asked, sounding oddly impressed.

"I just wanna know what you have on her," Brock said quickly.

"It was his idea," Ash said quickly, jerking his thumb in Pikachu's direction. In response, Pikachu let a small spark of electricity hit the appendage, causing Ash to wince and shake his hand to get the sudden numbness to go away. "Anyway, costumes! Weren't we talking about that earlier?" He had to mentally applaud himself, since that seemed to be the right topic to switch to, as May and Misty both perked up at the prospect.

"These dresses are gorgeous," Misty gushed, letting her rare, girly side show. "We can actually wear something like them?"

"Yeah," May said with a nod. "Brock said that we can buy them in the shop inside the castle." She quickly linked her arm through the older girl's and said, "Come on! We need to find awesome ones and catch up! Oh! And Ash, you should dress up Pikachu too!"

"Yeah," Max agreed with a laugh, "that'd be pretty funny."

"Pika?" the Pokemon in question said as he tilted his head curiously, having been distracted by a Taillow flying by. No one answered him though, leaving him feeling a little worried.

"So, that's why you've been hopping around like your Totodile," Brock said teasingly as May and Misty moved ahead of them. "Excited to see Misty again, are we?"

Against his will, Ash felt his cheeks heat up. He crossed his arms in front of his chest and said, "Well, she's my friend, and I rarely get to see her."

"Yeah, and apparently you missed her so much that you're willing to blackmail her sister to see her again." The fact that Brock didn't go off into la-la land at the mention of Misty's sisters was a testament to just how amused he actually was. "So tell me—"

"It was Misty!"

Ash and Brock both looked down at Max, who was walking between them and was now staring up at Ash with wide eyes.

"Umm yeah, that's Misty," Ash said slowly, glad for the interruption, but not quite understanding what the young boy meant. Maybe he bumped into one too many trees while reading, and it was finally coming back to haunt him.

"No, I just...I know this is random. Don't ask where it came from. But remember when Jirachi was here?" Max asked, his eyes flickering a bit with sorrow at the mention of the friend that he only got to know for a week but would be with him forever. "I was upset because he'd have to leave, and you told me that he'd always be with me because he'd always be in my heart. You said that best friends never forget each other and then said that you had a friend who had to go away, and that you missed her and thought about her every day. I always wondered who you were talking about. It was Misty. Though, now that I think about it, that should have been obvious."

Ash was sure that his face was as red as Pikachu's cheeks, and he could feel his friend snickering on his shoulder. Casting a quick glare at the Pokemon, he demanded, "How do you even remember that? I can't even remember what we talked about yesterday."

"Well, that's because it's you," Max shot back, causing Ash to scowl at the dig at his intelligence. "Besides, it was a pretty big deal." Max frowned a little bit, looking off in the distance. "I'd never forget that."

Feeling the air getting a little heavy around them, Brock cleared his throat and then, with a silly grin on his face, said, "Thought about her every day, huh?"

"Ugh!" Ash cried out, throwing his arms up into the air before (unsuccessfully) trying to hide the blush that overtook him. "Let's just go find costumes! We have a competition to win, right Pikachu?"

"Pika!" the Pokemon agreed enthusiastically, sensing his friend's desperation to change the subject. As much as Pikachu loved to tease Ash, he was still, and always would be, firmly on his side, so if it was bothering his trainer too much, Pikachu would back off and force anyone else who continued to bother him to back off too. That much, Brock was well aware of, and the young man decided to let the subject go for now.

"There you guys are!" May said when they finally caught up. "I thought you got lost on the way here or something."

"Wouldn't surprise me if they did, knowing Ash," Misty teased her friend.

"That was your fault," Ash replied, crossing his arms in front of him.

"Excuse me? How was it my fault?!"

"You had the map more than I did!"

"No, you had it more!"

"Did not!"

"Did too!"

"Did not! Brock did."

There was a pause, and they both rounded around to look at Brock. He chuckled weakly and glanced around at the younger ones with them.

"Come on," May urged them as she started running through a much emptier hall. She didn't catch

onto Brock's silent signal for help, but she was eager to try on costumes. She was a coordinator, after all. "The store is this way. There's apparently a big room with loads of costumes, and we can pay for them on the way out."

"May, wait up!" Max cried out, running after his older sister.

Misty smiled at the two of them as she fell in line with Ash and Brock, the three of them walking calmly after the excited Maple siblings, the argument forgotten. Misty cast a glance over at her two friends, taking in the changes in them since the last time they were all together. They were both pretty much the same, though, Misty had to admit, she was impressed that Brock hadn't assaulted over half the women they walked by yet. It seemed like a lot of the dresses around involved low cut tops, and that should have set him off. Misty was glad that he seemed to have matured even just the slightest bit, though she suspected that he was just distracted by something else for now. The way he kept looking at Ash and grinning told her as much.

Ash looked a little embarrassed over something, and it occurred to Misty that Brock was probably teasing him about inviting her to the festival. For what it was worth, she was equally surprised when he told her their plans and insisted that she should take some time off and meet them there. He always joked about or hinted that she should try to catch up with them, and though she was sure that she'd never be able to travel around with him like she used to, it still made her feel happy to know that, despite their arguments and whoever he met, he still wanted her around. Even after nearly a year of being apart.

Though still obviously excitable, impulsive, and dense as he'd always been, she could see a bit more maturity shining through Ash now, maybe from the fact that he was acting as a bit of a mentor to both May and Max, even if Max seemed to know more than he did at times. Misty thought on that for a moment, realized that traveling with trainers less experienced than himself was actually helping him just as much, if not more, than traveling with trainers who were more experienced.

Though, to be fair, the only extra experience Misty had over him was from the fact that she grew up in a Pokemon Gym. There she trained her Staryu (now a Starmie) before she was 10, and when she could leave home, she was quick to do so, taking her Staryu, Starmie and a Goldeen with her, a few days before she was even technically allowed to leave. She came off as more knowledgeable than Ash, but she was only a month older than him, and they'd been on the road the same amount of time before she went back home. Most people assumed that she was older though, because she was more level headed, a bit more experienced, and she used to be quite a bit taller than him.

She missed traveling with Ash and Brock more than anything and was glad to be with them, if only for a little while. She never regretted being the Cerulean City Gym Leader; no, she loved it, but she wished that she had a little bit more freedom. More than anything, she wished her sisters would take a little more responsibility and let her take longer leaves to catch more water Pokemon and to battle trainers that were stronger than the beginners. That was the biggest drawback to her gym. She had some fiercely strong Pokemon, but there was a certain level that she had to be at. It was one of the things that most trainers didn't know. She felt like she didn't have as much room to grow herself because of that and wished her sisters could let her take smaller trips from time to time.

That, and Misty still missed traveling and her friends a lot. Though admittedly jealous of May at first, feeling like she'd been so quickly replaced (briefly realizing that was probably how Brock felt when they met Tracey, even though Brock left them on purpose, and she was forced to leave), but she had a soft spot for the younger girl and her brother now. They weren't replacements; they were just new friends on a crazy adventure. Even if May was younger, and quite a bit different from Misty, she still enjoyed talking to the younger girl when she called. Still, there was something

about walking with just her old friends that felt right to her.

"They're all so gorgeous!" May cried out as she rushed past a cashier, who was dressed up already and looked highly amused. "How do I pick just one?"

That seemed to break Ash out of whatever little brooding fit he was in, and he quickly rushed after the youngest members of the group, Misty and Brock rushing to keep up with him. Misty was in awe at the sheer amount of costumes in the room and had to admit that May's question of being able to choose just one was a legitimate one.

"I need to find a cape!" Ash exclaimed suddenly, rushing into the racks.

Misty snorted with amusement and said, "He would." She went down the row May disappeared into, eager to pick out her own costume.

Pikachu watched everyone leave, feeling happy that his Pikachupi was there with them that day. He knew how much his Pikapi missed her. Sure, the others were there, but it wasn't the same.

A rustling sound caught Pikachu's attention, and he looked around at a small voice saying, "Pichu!"

"Pi?" He looked and saw a Pichu staring at him before darting behind the pink curtains. Pikachu walked over to it and said, "Pikachu?" He blinked as a soft glow came from behind the curtain and jumped back in surprise when a Treecko appeared.

"Treecko tree!" The Pokemon hopped on a table, climbing out the open window it was by.

Pikachu stared with surprise, honestly not sure what was going on. Maybe he should really start listening to Pikapi and cut back on the ketchup. He jumped to the window ledge and looked out, watching the Treecko used its sticky fingers and toes to walk across the wall and out of sight.

"Pika?" he said himself as he blinked with confusion. Yes, he was definitely going crazy, and he blamed Pikapi for it.

"What do you think, Pikachu?" May's voice caught his attention, and the little Pokemon looked around at her with interest.

The young girl was wearing a dress with a red and pink dress with a massive skirt at the bottom, a beautiful bow decorating the back. She wore a short, puffy-sleeved white shirt over it lined with purple and somehow managed to turn her bandana into a bow in her hair. Pikachu cooed happily, telling his friend in his own way that he approved.

"Wow May, is that you?" Max asked as he appeared, wearing a white tunic with short, puffy sleeves, a red and gold hat, puffy blue shorts, white tights, and a green and red cape on the back of his shirt. May giggled at her little brother, finding him completely adorable, despite how annoying he was.

"Tis I, indeed," May replied in a haughty but joking tone.

Brock appeared, wearing an orange, round hat on his head with long, beige robes, and a decorative, long poncho on top, his favourite colours of orange, brown, and green adorning it with gold accents. He smiled at the young girl and said, "Wow, May, you look great."

"Thank you, Brock," she said, glad to have approval from one of the people that she thought of as her older brother. She didn't want to wear anything inappropriate, having seen several teenagers,

even those closer to her age, wearing more revealing dresses when they walked in.

Back in the dressing room, Misty gritted her teeth as she came out, her frustrations building to no end. Her dress was styled to resemble a Milotic, with the soft fabric of the top being mostly a pale yellow while the bell sleeves were part pink. The skirt of the dress was in two layers like May's, the top layer with thick, black lines running through the mostly blue fabric, creating diamond shapes, a few of them coloured with the same dark pink as her sleeves. The last layer of fabric was completely blue, with small ovals of pink around the bottom, designed after Milotic's tail. She loved the dress and thought it looked beautiful, even going as far as to put the pearls that she wore with her mermaid costume in her hair that she left down, but it took forever to get on. At least the shoes she wore with it didn't have heels; that would have completely killed her.

She looked at herself in the mirror, her fingers going through her orange hair, wondering if she should have brought her extensions with her. She shook those thoughts off, wondering why she was so focused on what she looked like. She was Misty Waterflower, the tomboyish mermaid (or so people called her in Cerulean City); she didn't fret about her appearance that much.

Some movement in the mirror suddenly caught her attention, and she turned around, backing up slightly to look around the corner, a smile appearing on her face as she caught sight of Ash. He found his cape like he said he wanted and found a matching black hat that had a blue band around the middle with a golden symbol on it that she didn't recognize. He wore a long sleeved, dark beige shirt with blue gloves that had some sort of light blue gemstone on them with gold markings, a blue tunic over the shirt with beige pants, matching blue boots with golden ties up them, and a black pouch to finish the look off (and hold his pokeballs for the competition). She had to admit he looked charming with it on, but he wasn't even focused on himself at the moment, instead looking through a rack of tiny, Pokemon costumes.

"One for Pikachu?" Misty had to hold back her laughter as he jumped into the air. He spun around to look at her with wide eyes, no doubt about to yell at her, which she was entirely prepared to deal with. What she wasn't prepared for was for him to just freeze and stare at her for a moment before his face turned red, and he abruptly turned around again.

"Yup," Ash said quickly, his voice sounding slightly squeaky to even her. "I'm not sure which one though."

Narrowing her eyes at him, Misty came up to his side to look at the costumes and felt him tense up beside her. She cast him a suspicious look, and he vehemently tried to avoid her gaze, his cheeks and across the bridge of his nose red. Misty wasn't a dense person; she could put two and two together, and after having several guys flirt with her back at the gym, she could notice small, different things about the ways they acted. If she didn't know Ash better, she would have sworn he was acting that way because he thought she was attractive. That was impossible though.

She paused for a moment as she thought back. He always did kind of stare when she had her hair down, even when he was young and even denser than he was now, and he admitted to finding her cute at times before too. Now that they were a bit older, maybe he did think a little more of her. That thought instantly made her feel warm and excited.

"Oh, what about this one?" she said suddenly, pulling out the small costume to show him. Ash seemed relieved that she didn't bring up his odd behaviour or red face, instead focusing on the clothes in her arms.

A smile appeared on his face and he said, "I like it." He hesitated for a moment before saying, "I like your costume too. Milotic's kinda appropriate for you, isn't it?"

The implications behind his words made her blush this time, because Milotic was said to be the most beautiful Pokemon in the world, though it was more likely that he was referring to it because it was a water type. Deciding to go with that, she said, "Well, there was no Tentacruel ones."

He snickered a bit at her words, knowing how volatile she could get when her favourite Pokemon was insulted, which it often was. Ash was going to keep quiet, he honestly was, but he wanted to start an argument with her. "I wonder why."

"What was that?" she challenged, green eyes narrowing at him as she clenched Pikachu's future costume tightly in her fist.

"You heard me. It's a Tentacruel. It's—"

"I swear, if you say it's ugly, I'll throw you out that window, Ash Ketchum."

"Well it is."

"Is not."

"Is too."

"Is not."

"Is too."

"Is not."

"Is too."

"Is not."

Ash was honestly surprised that neither of them started yelling yet. He couldn't understand it, but it was almost like they wanted to keep this argument between them. He moved his arms wildly and said, "Is too. Besides, you look really pretty with that dress on." His mouth instantly snapped shut after he spoke, and he desperately wanted her to throw him out the window now, unable to believe what he just said. Ash had no clue what was wrong with him, but it needed to knock it off before he made a complete fool of himself.

Misty's face turned bright red, causing her to curse her naturally pale skin. Ash might have been sort of able to hide a blush, but there was no way she could. She couldn't stop the small giggle from escaping her and said, "Well, your costume looks really good on you too." That was when she did a double-take when a sudden realization came to her. "How are you the same height at me now?"

Ash didn't realize that he was until she mentioned it and was a bit thrilled that he wasn't shorter than her anymore. Once they realized that they were eye to eye, they just stared at one another, both blushing, the tension between them thicker than any time they fought, and neither (Ash in particular) knew why. They just stared, until a small smile appeared on Ash's face. He was never one for silence and stillness, and he couldn't stop that small chuckle of amusement from escaping his lips. This caused Misty to let out a small laugh that she tried to suppress, turning it into an actual snort.

The sudden, hysterical laughter startled Brock, May, Max, and Pikachu, who looked back into the racks with confused expressions. Max looked up at the eldest and asked, "Should we be worried?"

"Umm..." Brock didn't know what to say to that. In all honesty, he was getting worried when it was so quiet back there. If there was one rule that he had imbedded in him, it was that, when Ash and Misty did something, they did it loud. The loud laughter wasn't bothering him, but the reason they were laughing could be trouble.

Ash suddenly appeared, trying hard to suppress his laughter and looking every bit the medieval hero, and said, "Check it out; this is me, right?"

"Chaa," Pikachu agreed happily with his trainer.

Misty popped up behind him a second later, smiling from ear to ear, and May clapped her hands together. "Misty, you look so pretty in that."

"Thanks, May." She grinned at the younger girl. "Your dress is really cute too."

"She does look nice, doesn't she, Ash?" Brock asked teasingly, earning a glare in reply.

Instead of verbally replying to that, Ash moved closer to Pikachu and motioned for Misty to do the same. She grinned almost evilly as the two advanced on the poor, unsuspecting Pokemon, who was on the ledge of a window and couldn't escape if he wanted to.

"Pi?" Pikachu managed to squeak out before Ash suddenly grabbed him, and Misty stuffed a shirt on him. Ash set him back down, and quickly put a hat on his head while Misty shoved little slippers on his feet, making him look like a tiny court jester.

"You look so cute," May said while clapping her hands together like she did when she saw Misty.

"Yeah, awesome," Max agreed as he stared at Pikachu, who cooed happily at that once he got over his shock at what happened.

"Well, the competition will be starting soon," Brock informed them.

"Awesome!" Ash cried out, his eyes lighting up happily. He held his arms out for Pikachu to climb up, and the yellow Pokemon bounded onto him without a problem, clothes not hindering his movements in the least. "Let's go!"

"Umm, we still have to pay," Misty pointed out to him, flicking the brim of his hat with her finger.

"Oh yeah," he said almost sheepishly. "Well, we gotta go this way to do that anyway, so let's go!" Almost impulsively, he reached out and grabbed her wrist, pulling her behind him as he bounded away. Brock would have teased them for that too, but he'd seen Ash do that a hundred times before, including when they wanted to kill one another.

He shook his head as he followed May and Max out of the room. He was sure that this little adventure was going to be an interesting one, and who knew, maybe he'd find a pretty girl in the process.

-End Chapter One-

Sky

Into The Castle

Misty was completely enthralled with the arena that the competition would be held in. There were several floors of medieval, stone, arched hallways circling the arena with people standing squished together in every possible spot to watch the battles below. There was something almost majestic and adventurous about being there, a feeling that she craved for the longest time.

Being a Gym Leader was great, and she was proud of the Cerulean Gym and how she turned it around from a complete failure of a place. Her heart yearned for more though, wanting to travel and feel adventure like she did when she traveled with Ash, Brock and Tracey. A gym, where there were regulations and rules on what types of pokemon she could use and what level, wasn't a place to learn and grow. The Gym Leaders who wanted to be more than Gym Leaders left their posts, Koga leaving the Fuschia City Gym to Janine to become a true Poison Pokemon Master and part of Johto's Elite Four, and Wallace from Sootopolis City in Hoenn leaving to become a world famous Coordinator, to name a few. She wanted to be a Water Pokemon Master, but she couldn't abandon her home.

In a complete contradiction, she didn't want to leave the gym permanently, not yet, at least. There was still so much she could learn and do as the Cerulean City Gym Leader. She missed traveling, but she knew that if she continued to work on her reputation as a strong Gym Leader, it would only make her ultimate goal a little more possible.

To learn and grow wasn't the only reason she wished she could leave home more often, but she would never admit to the other reason why, not even to herself. She was only fourteen; there was absolutely no way she could love someone, but even she had to admit, there was the possibility of liking someone beyond a silly crush.

She shrugged those thoughts aside, not wanting anyone to catch her blushing. Brock would just know what she was thinking about, and at the moment, she was willing to bring out the big guns to make him back off. She would speak Professor Ivy's name on repeat if that's what it took.

Trumpets blared around the arena, and they all perked up eagerly. A man with a purple tunic and hat walked onto the field and yelled, "Presenting her royal majesty, the illustrious ruler of Cameron Palace, Lady Ilene!"

In the balcony almost directly across from them, a young woman with long blond hair appeared, carrying a Mime Jr. With her. She waved to the crowd, who all responded back enthusiastically.

"Just look at her," May said dreamily as Max waved beside her. "She's beautiful." Brock was utterly speechless at the sight of her, and Misty was just glad that he didn't run over to her like some love-struck idiot and get them kicked out before the tournament even started.

Lady Ilene raised her hands into the air and said, "And now, in honor of Sir Aaron's noble deeds, we will begin our annual Pokemon Competition!"

Misty quickly shifted her eyes to the arena below and was surprised to see Ash rush out of one side. Across from him, another trainer rushed in, tossing a pokeball high into the air. She stared at the creature it released, not quite sure what to make of it.

"It's a Breloom," Max spoke up to her. "A grass and fighting type. Pikachu won't really have any advantage against him, so Ash should use another one."

"He's going to use Pikachu," Misty said, sounding sure of herself.

Proving her point, Ash helped launch Pikachu off of his arm and high up into the air. Immediately, electricity surrounded Pikachu, unfortunately destroying his costume in the process. The Breloom jerked with pain from the powerful attack, and Pikachu gave him no time to rest as he tackled it.

"Breloom!" the trainer opposite Ash called out. "He's going offensive, so you do the same! Use Jump Kick!"

"Use Agility, then hit him with Iron Tail first!" Ash cried out. He did remember that fighting-types were strong against steel-types, but that didn't bother him in the least at the moment. He didn't always play the type advantage, and remembered reading on the Hoenn League's official website that it was one of the things that made his battling style unique. They had profiles on all trainers who competed in their conferences, and while he was predictable in what Pokemon he used, it was hard to figure out exactly what he was going to throw at an opponent.

Pikachu managed to jump over the Jump Kick, slamming his iron-covered tail into the Breloom's head. The two Pokemon landed on the ground, and Breloom swayed for a moment before fainting.

"The blue trainer wins!" the referee called out, and Ash laughed happily as Pikachu ran back to him and jumped up into his arms. Ash hugged his best friend tightly, spinning around happily. Above, his friends all cheered loudly for him. He looked around until he caught sight of them and waved, smiling broadly before running out of the arena so the next trainer could come on. That battle may have been an easy one, but he knew it would only get tougher from there.

"Pikachu's awesome," Max said with a laugh. "He gave that Breloom the smack down! I hope that the Pokemon I get will become as strong as him."

Brock just chuckled at the youngest of the group before turning his attention back to the arena below, where another set of trainers were already facing off. One person who was dressed as a knight in a full suit of armour and used a Weavile looked rather strong, and Brock knew that the opponent's Tropius, a combination grass and flying type, had a double weakness to Weavile, who was part ice-type, part dark. Sure enough, after a few moments of a power struggle, the Weavile defeated the Tropius with a powerful Shadow Ball. That person was incredibly powerful, and Brock knew that Ash would have to look out for that particular trainer.

Misty cheered loudly as Ash battled, Pikachu proving to be more than able to handle most of the Pokemon that came his way. She remembered when Ash called her after he first got to Hoenn, saying how injured Pikachu was that they had to basically reset his electricity in his body to keep him alive, and it was almost like he was leveled down. It was impossible to tell now though, especially since Ash seemed to have evolved himself beyond brashly rushing through a battle without any strategy at all.

She screamed so loudly when Ash won his round in the semi-finals that she actually hurt her throat a bit and attracted an amused look from Brock. Her face turned red, and she said, "Oh, go back to ogling Lady Ilene or something." She knew it'd probably just mean that she (or Max) would have to drag him away by the ear later, but she was willing to do anything to wipe that smirk off his face. That seemed to do the trick though, as he older friend looked back at the ruler of Cameron Palace with a dazed expression.

"Ash is going to fight against that knight!" Max cried out excitedly, fixing the chair that he was standing on to see over the railing. He had fallen off it earlier thanks to the shockwave of two attacks colliding, but he didn't let that bother him.

"He's awfully strong," May said, eyeing the knight's purple armour.

"Ash'll win," Misty said firmly, stomping her foot on the ground. Instead of teasing her about anything though, May just grinned and nodded her head. Then again, from the short periods of time that Misty was around the younger girl, she knew that dealing with May was sometimes like dealing with a female version of Ash, appetite and denseness included.

"This is the final battle!" the announcer called out. "The winner of this battle will be given the title Guardian of Aura for an entire year!"

Silently, the knight released Weavile again, but Ash didn't seem worried. Instead, he just said, "Alright, Pikachu. Weavile's Shadow Ball is strong; try to avoid it. Use Agility to get in close, then use Iron Tail!"

"Pika!" his friend cried out, darted forward so quickly that it was almost impossible to see him. The Weavile used his own Agility, and the two met mid-air, the physical attacks throwing both of them back. Pikachu landed on his four legs and glared at the Weavile.

"Tackle 'em!" Ash cried out while pointing at their opponent. Pikachu rushed forward, slamming into the Weavile and knocking it back a bit. It tried to use a Slash attack in retaliation, but Pikachu was quicker, dodging out of the way.

Ash's eyes narrowed when he saw a glowing, violet and black sphere of energy appear in front of the Weavile. "He's using Shadow Ball; get out of the way!"

"Pikachu!" Pikachu cried, jumping high into the air to avoid the attack, the resulting explosion of the energy hitting the arena's dirt floor, giving him a boost higher into the air. Pikachu watched as the Weavile jumped at him.

"Use Thundershock!" Ash yelled, and Pikachu quickly followed his orders, letting the electricity explode out of his body, slamming into the Weavile and sending it back to the ground as he too began to fall. They both hit the ground, but he didn't let up.

"Alright, give him a Thunder attack instead!" the young Pokemon Trainer encouraged his friend, and the power of the electricity nearly tripled in intensity. He could actually feel it a bit himself, but not in a painful way. That feeling almost always caused Ash to feel a rush of excitement, because it usually meant victory was in sight.

Weavile tried to block the electricity with a Shadow Ball, but the attack exploded in his hands, sending dust and smoke up into the air.

Up on the balcony, Misty, Brock, May and Max all covered their mouths, coughing a bit on the dust as it reached them. Eyes stinging a bit, Misty leaned over the balcony more to see what happened before. She wasn't the only one though; nearly everyone seemed to be on the edge of their seats.

The dust settled just in time to see the Weavile fall back to the ground, where Pikachu looked like he could go another round, but was still tired.

"Weavile is unable to battle! Pikachu wins!" The announcer/referee called out, his voice booming from the mic that was no doubt hidden in the folds of his purple robes. "We have a new Guardian for the year! Ash Ketchum from Pallet Town!"

If Misty thought she hurt her voice screaming earlier, it was nothing compared to now. No one said anything to her, but that was probably because May, Max, and Brock were cheering just as loudly

as she was.

Ash laughed and jumped excitedly, unable to contain himself. "Yes! We did it!" It might have been a small, non-league competition, but it still meant something to him. Not just him though; he knew it meant something to his Pokemon too. Pikachu started sprinting towards him, and Ash rushed to meet his friend with a cry of his name.

With a startled cry, Ash stumbled to a stop, having to backtrack a bit so he wouldn't step on an Aipom that rushed out nowhere. He stared at the Pokemon as it grabbed Pikachu's hands and started jumping up and down excitedly. "Huh?"

Pikachu seemed just as confused, but after a few seconds, he started laughing and jumping with the excited monkey.

All of this came to a stop as the knight drew closer. Ash straightened himself a bit, feeling a bit disdained that everyone he fought was always taller than he was. That was good in a way, because it meant he could keep up with trainers much older than him, but on the other side of the coin, he was always on the shorter side of his age group, and he hated it more and more each day.

He watched as the knight took the helmet off, and was a bit taking back to see a tanned, young woman with long, dark brown hair and bright blue eyes grinning at him. "That was a great battle, you two," she said, shaking out her wavy hair. "Congratulations."

"Heh," he chuckled while rubbing the back of his head, almost knocking the hat off of his head. "Thanks. You and Weavile were awesome too."

From above them, May's mouth dropped in surprise as she cried out, "That guy's a girl!"

"I didn't see that coming either," Misty agreed. "What do you guys—Brock? Max?"

Both girls looked around, but neither one of the boys were present. May tilted her head curiously and asked, "Where'd they go?"

Misty looked around, movement in the arena catching her eye. With a sigh, she said, "Follow me; I know where they went."

While that was happening, the young woman smiled at Ash and said, "It's nice to meet you. I'm Kidd."

"I'm Ash," the black-haired boy replied happily.

"And I'm Brock, at your service!"

Ash jumped, stumbling back a bit as he looked beside Kidd with confusion. Brock was holding her hand, but the younger boy had no idea where he came from. He was positive that he had just seen Brock up on the balcony with the others and had no idea how he got down there that fast. Then again, it was Brock and a young, attractive woman, so Ash shouldn't have been surprised.

"I just wanted you to know," Brock started speaking, "that if you ever need a squire, you can always count on me...ah!"

Max seemed to materialize just as quickly as Brock had, grabbing his ear and pulling him away. "Great, not even a suit of armour can protect against you."

Kidd watched them go, her face one of clear confusion. Ash just stared blankly before looking

down at Pikachu, who shrugged. He looked back at the young woman and said, "Sorry about that. Brock's insane." He glanced at Pikachu again, grinning when he saw that he was once again jumping around excitedly with the purple monkey.

"Is that your Aipom?" Kidd asked curiously.

"Nope, never seen it in my life," Ash said with a shrug.

"Ash!"

He looked around at the voice, his grin becoming even bigger, if that were possible, when he saw Misty and May rushing towards him. Forgetting all pretenses of maturity that he was unconsciously trying to portray, he laughed and rushed to them, throwing his arms around both girls at the same time, squeezing them together. Neither one seemed to mind though, laughing and joining in the group hug.

"Hey, I thought Max was here," May said as she moved away from them, sapphire eyes looking around with confusion.

"He was," Ash said as he shifted slightly so that he was standing beside Misty instead of in front of her. "He dragged Brock away from Kidd."

"You must be a friend of Ash's," Kidd said as she came forward. "I'm Kidd, it's nice to meet you. And you must be his girlfriend."

Deja vu hit both Ash and Misty hard at that moment. People dressed up, saying those exact same words, happened before on what looked to be a peaceful island in the very center of the Orange Archipelago. Almost instantly, their faces turned identical shades of red.

"He is not my boyfriend!"

"She is not my girlfriend!"

May looked around at them and let out a giggle when she realized why Kidd made the mistake that she did. Ash shot her a curious look, and she just grinned at him, motioning to his side.

Ash looked down, his face turning even redder when he realized that, after their group hug, he'd left his arm draped over Misty's shoulders. Pulling his arm away like the contact burned him, he mumbled something intelligible, and Misty shuffled a bit while looking around, playing with the edge of her pink sleeve.

The referee came over to them and said, "Lady Ilene wishes to speak to you in the palace. Come along."

"Oh, um, my friends..." Ash said, motioning to the two girls.

"They may come as well," the man said with a nod.

"I'll go get Max and Brock," May said, twirling on the spot and walking back into the hallways.

"It was nice to meet you. Maybe I'll see you later," Kidd spoke to them before she turned to leave.

Silence befell the remaining two as they watched Pikachu and Aipom play together. Misty nudged him gently and said, "You did good."

"Thanks," Ash replied with a grin, glad that the awkward air between them was gone.

"You'd never know that you were the same kid who tried to use a Caterpie against a Pidgeotto," she added smugly.

"Says the person who tried to use a Goldeen in a Pokemon Center with absolutely no water for it to swim in," he shot back. She stared at him, stunned at his quick comeback. For his part, Ash seemed equally as surprised that he was actually able to come up with something so quickly and mentally applauded himself.

Misty was so stunned at the reply that she couldn't think of anything else to say at the moment. She'd think of something soon, no doubt, but her mind was blank.

"Okay guys, we're—what happened?" May asked as she returned with her brother and Brock.

"He just beat me at a verbal fight," Misty said, her airy tone portraying her shock as she pointed at Ash, who just smirked smugly.

"If you'll follow me, please," the man said to them before a fight could break out.

May grinned broadly and said, "I'm so excited! We get to see the inside of the castle!"

"We were going to see it anyway," Max pointed out, causing her to scowl and glare at him.

Misty smiled at the two of them and moved beside Ash as they followed the man towards the castle. "That seems familiar, doesn't it?"

"Nah," Ash said with a shake of his head as he grinned at her. "Our fights are way more entertaining."

"Pika cha Pikachupi, Pikapi," Pikachu spoke up teasingly from where he walked with the Aipom, who was apparently joining them in the castle.

Ash shot him a quick, annoyed look, and he said, "That's enough from you." Both Pokemon giggled at him.

They all walked in silent awe as they took in the sights and sounds of the castle. Ash was quick to notice two different things, one being the blue-green crystals that were both on the outside of the palace and in a lot of the decorations inside, and there were a lot of pictures of a young man who was dressed the exact same way he was.

Ash let out a tiny gasp that only the Pokemon noticed when he realized that the gemstones on the gloves the man was wearing in the paintings (the same ones his were replicas of) were made of the same crystal that seemed to be everywhere else here. It was an odd thought for him, since he just won a small tournament and should have been thinking about that alone, but there was something oddly distracting about those stones and about the man in the paintings, though he couldn't pinpoint what it was.

Brock was almost shaking with excitement. They were in a magnificent castle lined with pictures of blonde-haired, green-eyed beauties, no doubt Lady Ilene's ancestors. There were a lot of beautiful women there that day, dressed up in costumes that he highly approved of. Not only that, but there was going to be a ball of sorts to honor Sir Aaron and that years proclaimed Guardian of Aura. They were allowed to go to it anyway, but the fact that Ash was the Guardian of Aura, and they were his friends meant that the ladies would actually notice him. It was going to be a glorious night in Brock's opinion.

Max walked with his brown eyes darting in every possible direction, trying to take everything in.

He was a curious boy and loved taking in knowledge of any kind, so everything around him fascinated him. Finally, his eyes rested on Pikachu and the Aipom he was talking to, wondering where it came from. It seemed like a nice enough Pokemon, so he wasn't worried about its presence, just curious. Max couldn't wait until he was old enough to get his own Pokemon. He already had it planned out to a point: He'd get Treecko as his starter, and he'd be sure to catch a Poochyena and a Ralts, since having dark and psychic Pokemon around were always helpful. He briefly wondered why Ash didn't seem to have those kind of Pokemon. He really should.

May was in awe at how beautiful everything in Cameron Castle was. The clothes, the decorations, the structure, the people, everything was just perfect. She wished that they could hold a contest here too, because it would be the perfect backdrop for one. Maybe Drew would come to compete in it too. Not that she needed him to be around or anything. He was her rival, though he was nice enough to always give roses to her Beautifly. She always wondered about that, but when she questioned the boys, Max would just shrug it off because he didn't care, Brock would snicker, and at first, Ash just looked clueless about it, but sometime during their travels, it seemed like he suddenly caught on to whatever Brock found so funny about the situation. She shook her head, brown pigtails moving across her skin as she did. She was in a beautiful place and wondering why Drew gave her roses? That was just ridiculous.

Misty was excited to be at Cameron Castle. She rarely got to travel anymore, only leaving for a day at a time to go on a quick adventure with Tracey or whoever was stopping by, like Casey or Sakura. Sometimes even Daisy would go with her, but she never expected to be allowed to go so far for a few days, because when she went to Hoenn and even Pallet Town, Daisy seemed incapable of dealing with the gym. She was just happy to be with all of her friends, and the fact that she felt almost like a princess in a fairytale didn't hurt either. Misty was always a tomboy growing up, but she still liked girly things too. She just didn't mind getting her hands dirty either.

They finally reached a large ballroom where Lady Ilene was waiting on her throne, a stool for her Mime Jr. at her side with another smaller but nice chair a little bit to the left, and another one behind it where her Lady-in-Waiting sat politely. When her green eyes fell onto them, Lady Ilene smiled broadly and stood up, "Thank you for coming."

"The pleasure's all ours," Brock said dreamily, but he didn't move because he could feel Misty and Max's eyes blazing through him. That, and he had his wits about him for once and was sure that grabbing the ruler of Cameron Castle would have him thrown out before the ball, and he didn't want that.

"There is a celebration tonight to honour Sir Aaron, and we will be presenting you, Mr. Ketchum, with a very important artifact that you need to keep safe during your time here. It is very important to our heritage, so please take care of it."

Ash seemed taken back by that and said, "Umm...sure. You can call me Ash if you want." He could hear Misty sigh with annoyance behind him and briefly wondered what he did to annoy her, not aware of how casually he was speaking to the ruler of the castle.

Not the least bit insulted, Lady Ilene smiled and said, "Of course. And may I inquire the name of your companions?"

"I'm name's Brock Slate," he said stiffly, having to remind himself again and again not to move. He was sure that if he did, he would jump on her. "I'm from Pewter City."

"I'm May Maple, and this is my little brother, Max," May said, looking entirely starstruck while Max had a bit of a blush on his face as he shifted beside his sister. "We're from Petalburg City in Hoenn."

"And I'm Misty Waterflower. I'm from Cerulean City," Misty said, almost tempted to leave out her last name. Though a good Gym Leader, the name Waterflower was still synonymous to her sisters. It always would be, and that was something she came to accept a long time ago.

Lady Ilene nodded and said, "As part of winning the competition, you and your friends are granted the opportunity to stay in Cameron Castle overnight if you so wish." That comment was directed at Ash, though a smile played on her lips when she saw him look at his friends instead of just saying yes.

She watched as everyone, even the little Pikachu at his feet, stared at him with pleading, exciting eyes, and Misty even going as far as to grab his arm and give him baby Growlithe eyes. He looked away from them quickly, a bit of a blush on his face. "That'd be great." Misty nudged him roughly. "I mean...umm...it'd be an honour, your highness?" The redhead subtly nodded at him in approval.

She clapped her hands together and said, "Excellent, I'll have rooms prepared for you. Feel free to explore the castle before the celebration. Any rooms that are off limits will have guards in front of them, so don't worry about wandering where you're not allowed to be. Oh, and when you come back tonight, Ash, you need to come exactly where you are now, understand?"

"Yes, ma'am," he said, earning a groan from Misty and an amused giggle from both May and Max.

Lady Ilene smiled at them and watched as they all left the room. She looked at her Lady-in-Waiting and asked, "What do you think?"

"He's a lot younger than the people who usually win," the elder woman said while watching them. "He could do with a lesson on manners as well."

"Perhaps, but he has a good heart," Lady Ilene said. "That is what we want to promote." She looked up at the large painting of Sir Aaron that was on the wall. "That is the type of person Sir Aaron would have wanted to honour him."

"Mime mime," Mime Jr. agreed, looking up at the painting in the exact same stance she did.

Out in the hall, Misty punched Ash's arm, causing him to let out a whine. "What was that for?"

"I can't believe you spoke to her like that! What's wrong with you?" she hissed at him.

Raising an eyebrow, Ash stared at her skeptically and said, "Like you're one to judge on manners."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Exactly what it sounds like."

"Guys, if you fight, we'll probably get kicked out," Brock said quickly to them.

"He started it," Misty said while pointing at Ash.

"She started it," Ash said at the exact same time.

"Here we go," Brock said with a sigh, earning a confused look from May and Max. "You've seen their back and forth banter, but never seen this before. It's about to get impressive."

"I did not," they spoke at the same time. "You did too. Stop saying things at the same time as me. Stop it! This is all your fault!" They spoke in complete sync with one another, both looking visibly annoyed.

"Wow," May said in awe. "I don't think I could stage that in a contest. Did they do that often?"

"Yup. Once they start this, they'll usually go for a few minutes unless something interrupts them."

"Ai ai pom!" the monkey cried out while laughing, jumping up onto Ash's shoulder and knocking his hat off of his head, visibly startling the boy.

"Like that?" Max asked while laughing.

"Yeah, like that," Brock agreed.

The Aipom suddenly stopped moving and, using its tail, moved around so that it could stare at Ash with narrowed eyes. Ash leaned away as much as he could while it was still attached to him, eyes darting to his friends with a bit of alarm. "Pikachu, what's it doing?"

"Pikapi cha pika ka pi cha?" Pikachu spoke to the Aipom. The purple Pokemon didn't answer, instead staring at Ash with a curious expression, tilting its head slightly before jumping off of him and grabbing Pikachu's hands, swinging him around while laughing again.

"That was weird," May said.

"Probably just fascinated by how a human could look so much like it," Misty said teasingly, earning a glare from Ash.

Max blinked up at her and said, "How's that an insult? You said that Aipom was cute earlier."

Brock laughed at that, and he laughed hard, having to use May as a crutch to stay standing. For her part, May was lost in a fit of giggles while Max just stared at them all like they were insane.

Misty's face turned bright red, and against her better judgment, she looked over at Ash. She expected him to look completely smug about how that turned out, but while he was certainly amused, that bit of harmless maliciousness that she remembered seeing so many times before wasn't there. If the redness of his cheeks said anything, he was a bit embarrassed too, though he didn't look insulted like he would have before. That made her own embarrassment fade away, wondering what could possibly be going through his mind. She didn't ask, and even if she did, he wouldn't have answered.

"Come on," he spoke up. "We should explore the castle before the party." Without another word, Ash turned on his heel and started walking away, the motion making his cape swirl around impressively, something that he was secretly pleased with.

-End Chapter Two-

Sky

The Staff And The Stone

Night fell on Cameron Palace, but on that particular night, even in the town not far from the castle, everything was lively with music, lights, dancing, food, and fun. Once a year, they celebrated Sir Aaron and his sacrifice to save the kingdom, and when they celebrated, even the young children were allowed to stay out late.

It was something Max was relieved about. As much as he argued with his older sister, she was still a mother Blaziken to him at times, and one of those times included bed time. Unless something came up (which seemed to happen more often than not around Ash), she was fairly strict about him staying up too late. Now though, the young girl was too distracted by the sights and sounds around her.

She was beside Misty, eagerly whispering to her as they eyed the crowd of people, though Max noticed that the orange-haired girl's eyes kept going back to where Ash stood up by the throne for Lady Ilene and the chair he had to sit on, though hers was up a set of stairs from his seat. Ash was eyeing the old woman who was standing beside his chair warily, though Max didn't know why.

The crowd fell silent as Lady Ilene was given a polished, wooden staff. It had metal rings and decorations with a shimmering crystal at the top, and Max was in pure awe of it. He wished that he could have something like that. She held it out for the crowd to see before turning towards Ash.

The older boy (in comparison to Max) had been whisked away earlier when they first entered the throne room again, the old lady speaking quietly to him. Max figured he was probably told what to do ahead of time, but knowing Ash, that wouldn't matter.

Ash stayed still, with the ever-present Pikachu on his shoulder, trying to fight down a grin that threatened to appear on his face. He had been told to stand tall (he scowled a bit at that) and proud, but to remain dignified, not smile like a silly child who got a new toy. It was difficult to pull off, but Ash figured that he could do it.

He stared at the staff in awe, his dark brown eyes moving to the gem at the top. It seemed to be made from the same crystals as everything else around the castle, and once again, it felt odd to him, though he couldn't explain why.

"This is the staff of the guardian," Lady Ilene said, projecting her voice, since she didn't have a microphone on. She had the script that she needed to say well-rehearsed after so many years. "It once belonged to the great Sir Aaron."

Misty smiled broadly along with her friends, though that changed when someone bumped into them. She looked around with a scowl, doing a double-take when she saw a woman with magenta hair followed by a man with periwinkle hair. There was something oddly familiar about them. Instead of focusing on that, she turned her attention back to Ash.

"According to our traditions, the winner of the Pokemon Competition is named the Aura Guardian for the year," she said, smiling down at Ash as she did. "And he or she is presented with this staff."

"Awesome," Ash breathed out, unable to stop himself. He knew he was getting the staff for the night, but it was still amazing to see. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Misty and May both face-palm and figured that the people closest to him heard his words.

"On behalf of this kingdom, Ash, it's yours," Ilene said, holding it out to him.

"Thanks," Ash said, taking the staff into his hands. The weight of it didn't feel awkward or anything like that, and all he could do was stare at it in awe. "This really belonged to Sir Aaron?" He was sure that if his mother knew he was holding something so old and valuable, she would have a heart attack.

As Ash stared into the crystal that caught his attention, an odd feeling passed over him, his smile fading from his features, though Pikachu continued to beam until he sensed the odd change in his trainer.

He blinked as he stared at the stone and would have sworn that he saw a dim glow appear in the middle of it for just a moment.

"Why did you betray me?"

Ash managed not to jerk back with surprise when he clearly heard the question in a deep, powerful voice. The audience, his friends included, were still applauding and cheering, not noticing anything strange with the situation. He was confused because voices that came out of nowhere tended to be bad for him. When that happened, he usually ended up in some sort of horrible situation. He looked around at the old lady behind him, glancing briefly at the Mime Jr. that climbed onto the chair he was supposed to sit at, and asked, "Did you say something, ma'am?" He knew it wasn't her voice, but an old lady suddenly sounding like a man sounded a lot less strange than hearing a voice out of nowhere.

"Not a word," she said, staring at him with confusion.

That was the last thing Ash wanted to hear, and he looked around to see if there was a man anywhere near them that he could have heard, the Mime Jr. mocking his movements. There was no one around him though, and at the woman's stern glare, he stopped looking around wildly.

Completely ignoring his odd behaviour, Lady Ilene moved to the center of the stage and said, "And now, in honour of Sir Aaron and our new Guardian, we will begin our grand ball! Please enjoy the music and refreshments, everyone. Small Pokemon are allowed to join the festivities as well, but due to the confines of space, please keep larger or untamed Pokemon in their pokeballs." With that, Lady Ilene moved to her throne, sitting tall and proud with perfect posture.

She grinned at Ash and nodded to his chair, and he sheepishly sat down, not having caught the cue to sit down. Much to his displeasure, the old lady was standing right behind him and would no doubt be watching him like a hawk all night.

"Misty," May said teasingly as people began pairing off. "You should go dance with Ash."

"What?" The older girl's cheeks turned pink. "Why would I want to dance with him? He'd probably squish my feet and trip me within the first five seconds. Besides, I'm not sure he's allowed to move from there anyway."

May waved her hand and said, "Well, I'm sure he'd like someone to talk to in that case. You know how antsy he gets. Better go before some Prince Charming sweeps you off your feet."

"Why would that be a bad thing?" Misty was starting to think that this girl, who wouldn't be turning eleven for another month (Ash told her, when asking what sort of birthday present he should get for an eleven-year-old, female friend), was way too observant about this. Wasn't she the girl that believed that the roses her rival gave her were for her Pokemon? Even Ash could catch that it was an excuse and a bad one at that.

"Because," May said with a silly grin, "you don't want a Prince, you want an Aura Guardian." With that, the girl skipped away, leaving a blushing Misty behind.

One thing that Misty had to admit that was right though, was the fact that she didn't really want to dance with anyone else, which was really strange. She rationalized it by telling herself that she came to see her friends, not to dance with some guy she didn't know who would probably hit on her; it happened before. Instead of going over to her friend though, she escaped to the refreshment table.

"Hi Misty," Max said cheerfully, eyeing all of the food before him. "I don't even know where to start."

Misty laughed at the young boy. "Well, try a bit of everything. May seems to be busy." The young girl was dancing with a handsome young man that was no doubt trying to impress someone else by dancing with a young child, or maybe he was just a nice guy and enjoyed making people smile. Who knew? May seemed to be having fun dancing.

She wasn't the only one. Misty nudged Max and pointed behind him, causing the young boy to turn around. He let out a groan when he saw Brock talking to Kidd, his face red and his whole body shaking. Much to their surprise (and, obviously, Brock's too), they saw her nod and lead him to the dance floor.

"What just happened?" Max asked Misty with confusion.

"I have no idea," she admitted with a shrug. She poured herself a drink and looked around when she saw some movement on the stage. Ash got up, leaving the staff leaning on the chair, and threw four pokeballs high into the air. His Swellow, Corphish, Phanphy, and Grovyle joined Pikachu and the Aipom (who came out of nowhere again). Ash saw her looking and grinned broadly at her before turning around and heading back to his seat, the little Mime Jr. clapping happily.

May left her dance partner for a moment, releasing Combuskin, Squirtle, and Munchlax before returning, and at Kidd's nudging, Brock released his Mudkip.

"You gonna release your Pokemon, Misty?" Max asked her.

Misty stared at the Pokemon thoughtfully before pulling two pokeballs out from inside of her sleeves (where there were handy little ties for pokeballs to be kept), and released Azurill and Politoed. "Go have fun with the others." Her other small Pokemon wouldn't really be comfortable outside of their pokeballs inside of this palace. Poor Corsola probably would have slid all over the place.

The other Pokemon greeted them happily, and Pikachu seemed to be introducing them to everyone else. Phanphy and Squirtle in particular seemed really interested in Azurill since they were all still younger.

Misty glanced towards Ash again, seeing that he looked rather put-out about something, squirming a bit in the chair, much to the visible disapproval of the woman keeping watch over him. She chuckled and made her way over to him.

"Someone looks bored," she said to Ash as she walked over to him, grinning a bit when he perked up at the sight of her.

"I'm not allowed to leave," Ash said with a pout. "I have to sit here all night and look..." He cast a light glare over his shoulder at the elderly woman behind him, "dignified."

Misty laughed and said, "You, dignified? I'll believe that when I see it." She completely ignored the woman, moving so that she was sitting on the edge of the stage, looking up at Ash with her dress piled around her. Though she was technically sitting on the floor, she still somehow made herself look prim and proper, and the old woman didn't seem to know what to say. "You have Mime Jr. and that staff to keep you company. Though I see Pikachu abandoned you for that Aipom. I'd say it must be a girl, but most starters are like their trainers, so he'd be clueless."

Ash made a face at her, one that Mime Jr. copied perfectly, causing Misty to laugh a bit. A shadow suddenly fell over her, and she looked around. A tall young man with bright blond hair and sky blue eyes stood over her, his hand held out to her as he asked, "May I have this dance? A lovely lady such as yourself shouldn't be sitting here."

He was certainly handsome, something that Misty noticed right away. She cast a glance out of the corner of her eye to see Ash's reaction and felt a little giddy when she saw he was extremely unimpressed. The last time she saw that specific look on his face was back in the Orange Islands when they met Rudy. She knew that Ash was learning to control his expressions during battles, but to the people that knew him, he was an open book. He couldn't hide what he was thinking or feeling for the life of him, and he was angry and jealous. This made Misty a little more excited and happy than it should have.

For what it was worth, Misty wasn't that good at hiding her emotions either. He just normally tended to be oblivious to them. This time though, he could see the sudden happiness on her face and realized that she was probably glad that someone asked her to dance so she wouldn't be stuck with him. He suddenly regretted winning the contest, because if he hadn't, he would still be able to come to the party, but he'd be free to do whatever he wanted.

Ash suddenly realized what he was thinking, and sank back into the chair (thank Mew it was at least extremely comfortable) with embarrassment. It wasn't because he wanted to dance with Misty. He hated dancing, even if he technically knew how because his mother made him go with her. He was horrible at it at the time and still probably was, but he knew what to do, and that was a secret he was taking to the grave with him.

"You know," Lady Ilene spoke suddenly, startling everyone as she appeared, "as the Lady of the castle, I too must stay on my throne for most of the events. However, just before the fireworks begin, there is a tradition that says the Lady and the Guardian of Aura may have a single dance with whomever they choose."

"Yes, that's right, isn't it?" the lady-in-waiting agreed.

Misty perked up at that, turning and ignoring the man in front of her completely as she looked at Ash, who seemed incredibly taken back by that. He just started at the two women and asked, "Why would I want to dance?"

Lady Ilene laughed before turning to the man who asked Misty to dance. "I do not mean to interrupt, but perhaps you could escort me to the dance floor?"

The man, who seemed to be annoyed by Misty's lack of an answer, suddenly looked like Christmas came early. He bowed and said, "It'd be an honour, milady." He held his arm to her and led her out onto the dance floor, where they drew most of the attention.

"With the Lady on the floor, very few people would pay attention to you," the lady-in-waiting said to Ash. "I will guard over the scepter."

"Huh?"

Misty, realizing that he was going to be clueless, stood up, grabbed his arm, and pulled him up off of the chair, down the steps, and towards a corner of the dance floor. She felt both annoyed at him for not getting what everyone was hinting at and a bit mortified with herself for actually doing this. He stared at her wide-eyed, looking rather shocked and slightly panicked, but she kept on her strong facade as she grabbed one of his arms, put it on her waist, putting one hand on his shoulder while taking his other one into hers. "Come on, no one's paying attention; there's no need to be embarrassed to be seen with me. We both know you'll go stir-crazy if you didn't move around a bit."

Ash just stared at her, his cheeks going red as his eyes slid to the floor. Not to avoid looking at her, but to make sure that he didn't step on her feet if he had to do this. He mentally scolded himself, because he was making it sound like she was torturing him or something, and that definitely wasn't the case. He didn't really know what to think, because he was so embarrassed about being so close to her as they carefully moved around, relatively unnoticed on the dance floor. At the same time, his heart was thumping painfully in his chest at being so close, but not in a bad way. How could he want to be near her and want to run away at the same time? It was terribly confusing.

So he settled on watching their feet, because he was sure that his boots would hurt her quite a bit if he did step on the flats that she wore, which did nothing to protect her toes. As if realizing what he was doing, Misty laughed and said, "I'm not really a good dancer."

Ash looked up at her with surprise and said, "What are you talking about? You do awesome at the underwater shows and other things like that in the past."

"Underwater being the key word," Misty said while rolling her eyes. "Maybe I'd be okay on my own, but I'm not used to dancing with someone. For what it's worth, you're a bit better at this than I thought you'd be." She moved her foot out of the way just before he almost stepped on it.

"Sorry," he said sheepishly. "My mom made me go to a few dance lessons with her." So much for taking that to the grave. "If you tell anyone, I'm going to Cerulean City and filling your room with bug Pokemon."

"You wouldn't dare," she seethed at him, going a bit pale at the thought.

"Okay, maybe I wouldn't," he admitted, because as much as Ash liked to tease Misty about her fear of bugs, he wasn't completely cruel. "But I will get Pikachu to toast your bike again."

She leaned in a bit closer to him, green eyes narrowing as she said, "No, you wouldn't, because then I'd have to follow you around until you actually got me a new one, not Nurse Joy coming to your aid."

Ash thought about that for a moment and honestly, seriously considered going to Cerulean City and frying her bike for that reason alone. He smiled slightly at the thought and said, "Maybe that'd be the point."

Misty suddenly stopped moving and stared up at him with a strange expression. "You do realize that I said I'd follow you around for pretty much ever the first time, right? That would still be the same."

"If it'd mean having you back, I'd do it." Ash looked away at the people around them, incredibly shy about what he just said. That wasn't something he was used to, because he was never shy.

Misty stared at him with complete surprise, and it seemed like Ash was surprised with himself. Every ounce of her being wanted to comment on it, but her small, logical side won over. If she did or said anything too forward, she'd probably scare him off. This was progress, an extreme, surprising amount of progress, considering how dense and single-minded he could be. Misty just

smiled broadly and suddenly switched positions, moving both arms around his neck and resting her head on his shoulder. She felt Ash tense up a little, and he didn't seem to know what to do with his hands, leaving them hovering awkwardly around her for a moment, but finally rested them on her back.

Ash felt like his face was on fire. He couldn't remember the last time he'd blushed so much in a single day, probably when his mother found the album of baby photos to show all of his friends. He liked this closeness with Misty and hated it all at the same time. Instead of thinking too much into it, because bad things tended to happen when he overthought something instead of following his instincts, he just held her close and moved with her.

In that position, he could also see around the room a little easier. May was looking slightly alarmed as she danced with a man that had blue hair, her former dancing partner being spun around wildly by a red-haired woman. Both of them looked suspiciously familiar, but they wouldn't stop moving long enough for him to actually see what they looked like. He couldn't see Max or any of the Pokemon, but he didn't worry about that, since they were probably just off exploring the castle together. No one was paying him and Misty any attention, or at least, he thought so until he scanned the room a second time. The first time he looked, Brock seemed to be looking around with two drinks in his hand; apparently Kidd ditched him, though she stuck around longer than Ash thought she would (he was a horrible friend at times). This time, Brock was looking directly at them, a smug smirk on his face.

Ash glared at him over Misty's shoulder, but Brock just sent him back a silly grin. He was never going to hear the end of this, he just knew it.

Misty moved again, startling him a bit, and she said, "Lady Ilene is going back up. You should go too."

"Yeah," he agreed, but much to his surprise, he found that he really didn't want to pull away. That completely contradicted his earlier thought about not wanting to dance with her at all, and he hated himself for it. Maybe he was just getting sick? That seemed like the only good answer he could come up with.

"Thank you," Misty said as she backed up, and looked almost unsure for a moment. It wasn't a common expression that he saw on her, and he was about to ask what was wrong when her expression shifted. She looked a bit determined, if not frightened, and did something he wasn't expecting. She put her arms back around his neck and hugged him tightly.

It wasn't the first time they'd hugged; there were moments of sickness or sadness when they were younger where the only cure was a hug, and in the middle of the woods, pride was something that could be thrown away for friends. This felt a little different though; she'd never held him so tightly before. He hugged her back, but his brain was completely on the fritz, wondering what the hell was going on.

Misty pulled away and shoved him back towards his chair. He stumbled a little, and she had to laugh at that. He chuckled, rubbing the back of his head before climbing back up the stairs, taking the staff back into his hands and sitting down.

"Why am I acting this way?" he mumbled to himself. The old woman cast him a confused look at his mumbling, but he just shot her a smile.

Misty honestly thought he'd be mortified. Sure, it was just a hug, but his mother and Pokemon aside, Ash didn't seem to be able to handle too much affection. He was definitely getting better from when he was younger though. He didn't push her away though, even if the hug felt kind of

awkward. Given how blunt yet oblivious Ash was when it came to dealing with people's emotions, she took it as a positive thing.

"What was that I just saw?" Brock asked as he slid over beside her, passing her the drink that was for Kidd.

Misty glared at him and said, "Shut it."

"I knew it! Well, Tracey was the one with real evidence, but I knew it!"

"Shut up, Brock!" Misty growled. "I just hugged him. It's no big deal. Maybe it's just because I missed my friend. Did you think of that? I bet neither of you missed me that much."

Brock's silly grin faded, and he looked over at Ash. "That's not true. We both miss you, and you know that. It's why we constantly keep in touch. To be honest, Ash actually admitted that it was weird without you around. Not surprising, given that he met you his very first day of being a trainer. He's never been alone, and suddenly he was." He shook his head. "Just because we make new friends, doesn't mean we forget the old ones. Ash knows that most of all. Look at all the Pokemon that he'd cherished, but he let them go so they could follow their own dreams. Even if he doesn't talk about them all the time, he never forgets them. Ash cares about his friends too much, even if he won't admit it at times." Brock paused, looking thoughtful. "You know, he always pauses or seems thoughtful when meeting new water Pokemon or going to the beach, or anything like that. We went fishing once, and he seemed really distracted the whole time. Sometimes it's the way he interact with May, almost like he's trying to keep her distant. I actually asked about that one when it got bad one time, just after you left after...you know...Togetic did. He said he didn't want anyone to think he was trying to replace you. Ash is a bit slow, but you know, but he's coming around a lot quicker than I originally thought he would. He cares. I care too."

A smile appeared on her face as she looked down. "I miss him...and you a lot too. I miss everything about traveling. Except for the bugs."

"So you really hate being there?"

"No," she said honestly, knowing he was referring to the gym. "I'd just like a bit more freedom. If my sisters were a little more responsible, I could have easily traveled with you guys around Kanto. It'd be easy to get back home if something bad happened. It's really confusing. I love it and I hate it at the same time. That place was my parent's pride and joy, and I don't want my sisters messing it up." She looked around the room at the dancing people. "I honestly think that someday I'll be able to travel a little more. Daisy's getting better, and we'll be able to switch on and off as gym leaders; maybe Lily and Violet will come around too." Her face twisted up in determination. "I will be a Water Pokemon Master! Being a good Gym Leader is the first step in that. Then, when it's possible, I'll travel more. You can't become a Master if you don't know the Pokemon and compete against other trainers that aren't beginners."

Brock clapped his hand on her shoulder. "That's a good way to think. And if you ever need help, just let me know. Ash too. You can always borrow my Mudkip to study, and I'm sure Ash would lend you his water Pokemon and any he will catch, just to study while you're there." He looked up at the ceiling. "It's really not fair that you're the youngest and need to be the oldest. You're determined though." He chuckled. "Both you and Ash are, and I just know you'll both get what you want. There are going to be a lot of bumps and choices to make along the way, but you'll get to where you want to be. You know, I don't regret taking over the gym for my father once I turned ten, but I would have regretted not going with you guys. I think you'll make the right choices too."

Misty smiled brightly and said, "Thanks, Brock."

"It's what I'm here for."

While his oldest friends had their heart-to-heart talk, and May danced with the crazy blue-haired man, Ash was leaning over the edge of his chair, staring at the picture of Sir Aaron behind him, though it looked upside down from his point of view. He jumped with surprise when someone cleared their throat and looked back at the old woman, who was sending him a heated glare.

He awkwardly righted himself again. Misty was right, he would go stir-crazy sitting in one spot for too long. Trying to distract himself from his boredom, he looked at the staff and said, "It's hard to believe this staff is hundreds of years old." He stared at it, becoming entranced with the staff again. "And I'm holding it now." He moved it in his fingers, staring at the crystal as the light danced on it.

"Sir Aaron."

He jumped as the deep voice invaded his thoughts, looking around in alarm. There was no one near him he could have made that sound. He was more than a little confused. "That voice again."

The woman behind him cleared her throat again, and he sat up straight, Mime Jr. copying him as he looked around at Lady Ilene, who once again walked down the stairs onto the level that he was on. The music and the dancing stopped, and everyone was looking up at them again.

"We will now pay one last tribute to Sir Aaron."

"Mime mime mime mime mime," Mime Jr. spoke at the same time.

"Our new Guardian," she said, stretching her arm out towards Ash, Mime Jr. doing the same, "will give the signal to start the fireworks."

Ash stood up quickly, well aware that he was supposed to do something. The problem was, no one told him about this at all, so he just stared out at the crowd cluelessly.

"Assume the pose of the Guardian," the lady-in-waiting whispered harshly to him.

Ash looked around at her, clearly confused, and she pointed up at the painting he was looking at earlier. Ash glanced around at it and, realizing what she was taking about, mimicked the position that Sir Aaron was in, smiling slightly when he saw Mime Jr. do the same.

Almost immediately, fireworks began to explode in the sky behind the large doors, people turning to watch the display in awe as the colours danced across the sky. Misty, May, and Brock all stood together, smiles on all of their faces as the colours illuminated them.

Ash tried to watch the fireworks, but he was quickly distracted by the staff. Something felt incredibly odd. It was like the very energy in his body was shifting, going up his arm and to the hand that was opened facing the crystal on the staff. He'd felt this type of thing before, like when he held the orbs on Shamouti Island or sometimes when he followed his instincts in a way that he couldn't understand, but never this strongly before.

"I believed in you."

Ash couldn't even think about the voice again as the staff started to shake in his hand. He would have sworn, for just a moment, that there was a glow emitting from his own hand, going into the crystal. In turn, the crystal started to glow brightly as the staff shook violently.

"Is something the matter?" the old woman asked as he let out a cry of alarm.

Ash wasn't sure what was happening, if it was the staff doing this to him or if he was doing it to the staff. He could almost feel the energy pulsing off of it, and he didn't like it at all. "This staff is going crazy."

"Ash!" he heard his friends call out in alarm as the staff shook so violently that, even holding it in two hands, he couldn't control it. Light exploded from the crystal, and while everyone else looked away from it, he couldn't stop staring at it. The light felt alive.

There was a sudden blast of power as the light streaked across the room with such a strong force, that it threw Ash to the floor. Almost immediately, Misty and May were on either side of him, helping him sit back up as he stared across the room with confusion. The light took form, and he realized a moment later what he was seeing.

There had been a Pokemon trapped in the gemstone, and he somehow set it free.

-End Chapter Three-

Sky

Lucario

Ash stared at the creature before him with confusion, not quite sure what to make of it. Kneeling beside him, he heard Misty inhale sharply, and May's hand that was on his shoulder was squeezing a bit. The creature had yet to move from its kneeling position; Ash could see that most of its fur was a bright blue, though its chest was a yellow-cream colour, and it had lines of black around its face, almost like a mask, with black hands, legs, and some black around its shoulders and around its waste. It had pointed ears, though he was confused for a moment because it almost look like it had floppy ears too, but realized that the black shapes on the back of its head weren't ears, with a blue tail and sharp, white spikes coming from its chest and on its hands. Ash stared at it with confusion, haven't ever seen something quite like that before.

"What is it?" Misty whispered to him. She had come into contact with even less Pokemon than him, so she was hoping that he knew. He shook his head, not really sure what to say. A quick glance in May's direction told him that she had no clue what it was either.

The Pokemon stood up slowly, and seemed to almost look around the room, though its eyes were closed. Ash got to his feet, keeping the staff held tightly in his hand as Misty helped up May. He stood slightly in front of both of them, though that was more of an instinctive movement than a thought out one. Both girls could take care of themselves, but he saw May as a younger sister and a student, someone to be protected, and while he definitely knew Misty could handle herself, he was still wary of this Pokemon.

His dark brown eyes looked up towards the staff and at the crystal on top. He could still feel the energy flowing through the staff, almost easier than he could feel it before, like a floodgate had burst open when the Pokemon was released. Did it act as some sort of ancient pokeball? If so, that was strange. Not as strange as the fact that Ash would swear that he could feel the people around them. He was very aware that Misty and May were behind him, and he could actually feel Brock come up beside the two girls. Everyone else, it was almost like they were background noise, but he was still aware of them. He had no idea what was happening.

The Pokemon moved suddenly, straightening up a bit, its head looking around as the black things on it suddenly stuck out and started vibrating. Misty shifted behind him and whispered, "They look the same as the decoration on the staff."

Ash looked up at the staff quickly and realized that she was right. So they were probably modelled after this specific Pokemon. The question was why.

"Sir Aaron!" It jumped high into the air, startling everyone, landing directly in front of Ash, who took a few steps back, keeping the staff in one hand and shoving his friends back with the other. He felt someone grab both the back of his cape and his shirt, pulling him away from the Pokemon.

"Why did you abandon the queen?"

"Telepathy," Ash whispered, suddenly understanding what he had been hearing earlier. The Pokemon must have been talking to him from the crystal, but the question was why had he heard it when no one else did? And why did it think that he was Sir Aaron?

"Answer me," it demanded.

"I don't understand," Ash said to it, keeping rather calm despite the fact that the Pokemon was both clearly agitated and skilled, if its high jump and locating him specifically without even opening its eyes said anything.

"Get away from it," Misty whispered to him, trying to pull him back more, but Ash ignored her, watching as the Pokemon slowly opened its red eyes.

He stared at Ash for a moment before jerking back with surprise. He looked around the room with confusion before quickly leaping away, disappearing out of one of the windows.

Ash pulled away from Misty, running up to Lady Ilene and her lady-in-waiting and asked, "Who was that?"

"Lucario," the elderly woman said in awe.

"Lucario?" Ash repeated slowly.

"According to our legends, Lucario served under Sir Aaron, much like the Pokemon for trainers would do for them today," Lady Ilene explained to him.

Ash looked at the stone on top of the staff and said, "He came from in here. Is this what a pokeball was like back then? Why didn't anyone let him out?"

"They didn't have anything like pokeballs back then," the old woman told him. "They used special harnesses and displays of power and might to control Pokemon. Some did so with friendship and loyalty, but it wasn't like it is today. No one could have guessed that he was in that staff."

"Yes. No one has ever garnered such a reaction from the staff in the thousand years that it's been here," Lady Ilene told him, and Ash looked back at the staff.

He could still feel the energy flowing through it and suddenly turned to face Brock. He held it out to him and said, "Tell me if you feel anything strange. Anything at all."

Brock took it from him, shifting the staff around in his hands before shaking his head and handing it back. "No. It just feels like a staff. Why?"

Ash didn't answer, instead handing it to May next. She shook her head and passed it to Misty, who just shrugged and handed it back to him. This alarmed him a bit, because it didn't feel just like a staff to him. It almost felt like it was alive somehow. Whatever was happening was happening only to him, or maybe it was happening because of him. Trouble and living legends seemed to follow him everywhere he went.

He looked back to where Lucario went. That Pokemon was trapped in the staff, so maybe it had answers. The question was where he went. Ash closed his eyes in thought, and a faint blue light started to appear in the blackness. He opened his eyes again in confusion before closing them to see if it happened again. It was like he could see shapes, even with his eyes closed. Most of it was faint, but he could clearly make out the staff (specifically the gem), and the people standing closest to him, though his friends stood out quite a bit. Almost like it was in the distance though, he could see something shining as brightly as the staff in his hands. He opened his eyes and without saying a word, started running.

"Ash!" He could hear his friends call behind him, but he ignored it, rushing out of the room. He stopped, closing his eyes again, deciding to question what was going on later and just go with it for now, and then started running again. It was almost like he could feel the Lucario moving. He was also aware that his friends were following him, but that didn't particularly surprise him.

Finally, he rushed past a fountain and came to a stop outside of an opened door. Lucario was inside, he was sure of it. He heard footsteps behind him, and turned to see Misty, Brock and May coming towards him. He was surprised to see that Lady Ilene and her lady-in-waiting were behind

them, moving just as quickly.

"Lucario's in here," he said slowly, looking back inside of the dark room.

"How could you possibly know that?" May demanded, staring at him oddly.

Lady Ilene gave him a searching look before nodding her head and walking inside, everyone else following her closely. Just as Ash said, Lucario was in the room, looking around at everything with confusion.

"Lucario," Lady Ilene called out to him, and he swung around to look at her.

He suddenly seemed excited as he said, "Lady Rin."

The old woman turned on the light, and Lady Ilene shook her head. "I'm afraid that I'm not who you think I am." She started walking toward him while everyone else hung back. "My name is Lady Ilene. Lady Rin was one of my ancestors." Without showing any fear, she calmly walked up to the visibly confused Pokemon, and hugged him to her. "You've been asleep for a very long time."

"Is it...possible?" he asked, more to himself than anything else, though it projected to everyone in the room.

"What I say is true," she said sadly, willingly letting go of the Pokemon as he backed away from her.

"But it—it can't be. I was here, in this room, just days ago."

"Please believe me," she said softly. "It may seem like days to you, but you haven't walked in this palace in centuries."

"This is heartbreaking," Misty whispered from beside Ash. She looked over at her, seeing that she looked honestly upset. He was a bit taken back by that, but he knew that Misty wasn't heartless. As much as she teased him or sometimes right out seethed at him that he only understood Pokemon and not people, she seemed to empathize with them much more too. The whole situation was strange, because Ash was sure that he could feel the emotions coming from everyone since there were only a few around.

Lucario was confused and upset, Lady Ilene was sad but slightly excited at the same time, her lady-in-waiting projecting almost the same emotions. Brock and May were both confused and in awe, while Misty was a bit upset.

He didn't like that last one at all. He reached out, grabbing her hand and squeezing it, never taking his eyes off of Lucario and Lady Ilene. Out of his peripheral vision, he saw Misty look around at him with surprise, but she didn't say anything, something he was thankful for. Instead, she just squeezed his hand back.

Lucario looked away from Lady Ilene, staring at the items inside of the class cabinet. He looked back around and asked, "What happened?"

"Come to the throne room, and I shall explain everything there to the best of my abilities, but..." Lady Ilene turned around and stared at Ash. "I don't think I can explain everything."

Ash looked down at the staff before looking back up at her. He wasn't sure he could help explain anything, since he was just as lost.

...

The throne room was much smaller than the ballroom, though there was a similar painting of Sir Aaron there with his staff. In this one, he was atop his Pidgeot, looking just as strong and proud as the other. Lady Ilene sat in the throne atop a raised level, looking both regal and authoritative with her lady-in-waiting standing behind her with Mime Jr. in her arms.

Lucario knelt on one knee in front of her, staring up at her with respect, as Ash, Misty, May, and Brock all stood behind him, the staff still in Ash's hand.

"Our stories tell us that you vanished during the battle," Lady Ilene said, staring at the Pokemon with interest. "Can you tell us what happened, Lucario?"

"There were two armies on the move," he explained. "They were both huge with people and Pokemon alike. Each had sworn to destroy the other, and the palace was trapped in the middle of the chaos. I left to see if there was a way to stop the fighting, but it was hopeless."

Ash tilted his head a little as he stared at Lucario, unable to hold in his question. There was something about that story that didn't add up. "So how was Sir Aaron able to make peace?"

"What?" Lucario asked, looking over at him with surprise.

"Our legend says that Sir Aaron found a way to stop the battle and save the palace," Lady Ilene said, drawing their attention back to her.

"Impossible!" Lucario cried out as he stood up.

"Why?" Misty asked, moving a little closer to Brock for cover when Lucario shot her a sharp look. She wasn't afraid of Pokemon (in general, bug types don't count), but she was wary of him.

The Pokemon looked away from them to stare at the floor, shock starting to build up on his features, though Ash was fairly sure he could actually feel the emotion pulsing off of him. "Sir Aaron," Lucario said, sounding hesitant and choked up at the same time. "He fled and trapped me inside of the staff."

Ash could feel the turmoil coming off of Lucario. He knew that the Pokemon fully believed what it said, but how could the legend of Sir Aaron be so wrong and backwards? It didn't make sense to him.

The four of them looked at one another, and May said, "In the legend, Sir Aaron's a hero."

"Could it really be wrong?" Brock asked.

Misty looked at Lucario, who's eyes snapped open at Brock's words. The Pokemon turned his attention up to the painting of Sir Aaron, obviously not sure what to make of the situation. She could only imagine how confused and conflicted he felt, but she was willing to listen to his story too. She had the feeling that the others were skeptical about it though.

"We will look in to this to see what is truth and what is fiction," Lady Ilene spoke up.

"I will do what I can to help," Lucario said, sounding almost relieved that she was at least willing to listen to him.

She smiled warmly at him and said, "Though much has changed for you, one thing has not. This palace is your home. Feel free to stay here for as long as you like."

Lucario stared up at her in awe before moving his paw to his chest and bowing his head in respect. "I am deeply grateful, Your Highness."

There was a pause before Ash moved forward a bit. He had so many questions with so few answers, and maybe this Pokemon could help answer them. Lucario turned to face him, red eyes locking with the staff in Ash's hand. He wasn't really sure where to start, so he said, "Lucario, why did you think I was Sir Aaron? Is it because this costume makes me look like him?"

Lucario looked over at the painting before saying, "No. The aura I sense in you is like Sir Aaron's."

"Aura?" Ash asked slowly. He was curious earlier about what a 'Guardian of Aura' was exactly, so he tried looking it up in his pokedex to see if anything using the term aura came up. The only thing he found was a reference to the fighting-type attack, aura sphere. He decided to make this known, and said, "What is aura, exactly? I know aura sphere is a fighting attack, but that's about it."

"I'm impressed you know that much," Misty teased him, and he shot her a weak glare.

Before Lucario could answer his question, the sound of rushing footsteps caught their attention as Max's voice echoed to them, "Hey guys!"

They all looked around to see a stampede of their Pokemon all led by Max. None of them were particularly worried about them, because they were bound to be exploring the castle, but as Ash looked at the group, an uneasy feeling settled inside of him. They were all panicked and confused, and Pikachu wasn't there. His brown eyes shot from one Pokemon to the next, but they all just seemed helpless.

"Max, what's wrong?" May asked, worry tinting her tone as she took a few steps towards her younger brother.

"You won't believe it!" he exclaimed excitedly. "I saw Mew!"

Ash's questions about aura and what was happening to him quickly flew out of his mind at Max's words. For a moment, there was a flash of a small creature flying across a cloudy sky after a storm, then there was another, blurred flash of the same creature surrounded in pink energy giggling and bouncing on a pink bubble one moment and then angrily blasting its energy in another. He shook his head as he heard the old woman say, "Oh, what an adorable boy! That costume he's wearing is so precious. He looks just like a little doll."

Ash stared up at her blankly, not really sure what that had to do with anything. Max stomped his feet against the ground angrily and said, "You're not listening to me!"

"We are Max," May insisted. "Where's Mew?"

"It just suddenly disappeared with Meowth and Pikachu," he said quickly, looking up at Ash, his excitement changing to panic.

Ash inhaled sharply. He knew something was wrong when Pikachu wasn't with the others, but how could he deal with Mew teleporting away with his best friend? Weak Pokemon could only teleport so far, but a Mew was an entirely different thing. It never occurred to him to question Max to see if he had actually seen a Mew, or if he was mistaken, since with all the weird things happening around him, there was bound to be a Legendary Pokemon around somewhere. It was just how things went with him.

"Mew?" Lucario asked from behind Ash, moving to peer around him at Max.

The young boy stumbled back in surprise, swinging his arms around to regain his balance as he let out a startled yelp. Once he had his feet firmly placed on the ground again, he shifted his glasses, as if making sure that they were on right, before he asked, "Who are you?"

"Oh, this is Lucario, a Pokemon who was sealed inside of the staff of the Guardian. Somehow he managed to set it free." Brock nodded at Ash as he spoke, and made the situation sound like it was a normal, everyday occurrence. People tended to get used to weird things happening when they were around Ash Ketchum

"Are you sure you saw Mew?" May asked, putting her hands on her hips as best as she could, though the puff of her gown made it hard to do. "Not a Pokemon that looked like it?"

Ash blinked at her, a little confused by the fact that there seemed to be two different conversations going on at the exact same time. He looked around at Misty, and asked, "What Pokemon that looks like a Mew?"

"Mewtwo?" Misty replied with a shrug. They both knew that, despite obvious similarities, there was no way to mistake Mewtwo for Mew.

"Mew was here," a new voice interrupted as Kidd walking into the room, a serious expression on her pretty face. She walked towards them quickly, and said, "I was on the roof when I saw Mew turn into a Pidgeot. It flew away with Meowth and Pikachu."

"But why would it take Pikachu?" Ash asked, sounding almost desperate.

"Could this Meowth talk?" Misty interrupted, a suspicious tone to her voice.

"Yes, it could," Kidd asked, seemingly surprised that she knew this.

"I knew I recognized those two who pushed their way through the crowd earlier!" Misty cried out. "It was Team Rocket!" She made a face. "Ew, May. You danced with James."

The younger girl looked slightly sickened by that fact.

"Who cares if Team Rocket is here?" Ash snapped, sounding annoyed by her interruption. "There's no way Mew was working with them, so it must have taken them for another reason."

"It was probably playing," the old woman said, and everyone turned their attention back to her and Lady Ilene. For having a Legendary Pokemon appear, neither of them seemed particularly surprised.

"Mew has a tradition of showing up here at the palace to play games and make mischief," Lady Ilene explain, an affectionate tone to her voice. "He's a well-guarded secret here too, since he never goes into the town in his true form." She looked up at the picture on the wall opposite of Sir Aaron's, which showed Mew above a rocky structure with clouds in the sky, the entire painting, aside from Mew, tinted green.

"It shows up here and takes toys all the time," the old lady said. "Never to be seen again."

Alarm rushed through Ash, and his hands clenched into fists. Legendary Pokemon or not, Mew was not allowed to take his friend away forever. "Does anyone know where Mew took them? I have to go rescue Pikachu!" There was no question about it, Ash was going after his loyal Pokemon whether anyone else wanted him to. He was no stranger to Legendary Pokemon, and where most people would have stood back and stared at them in awe, he was quite willing to go up to one and punch it in the face if need be. Another blurry image rushed through him of himself trying to punch Mewtwo. He didn't really remember that though, sure that he hadn't punched

Mewtwo when he met him.

"Ash, calm down," Misty said to him, putting her hand on his arm.

He looked around at her and said, "I can't. What if he's hurt?"

"Mew is a gentle soul; he wouldn't hurt anyone," the old lady tried to assure him.

"Yeah, well, gentle and playful or not, that didn't stop one from getting nasty before and nearly killing me," Ash snapped back. Though that memory was blurry, like it was wiped from his mind before and slowly starting to come back, he knew it was true. He didn't notice it, only a single being in the room did, but there was a slight flare of blue energy around his clenched, shaking fist that was pressed against his side.

Lucario stared at his hand for a moment before looking up at him, tilting his head slightly as his eyes narrowed. His attention moved back to Lady Ilene, but his eyes shot to Ash every once and a while.

Lady Ilene stood from her throne and walked towards the balcony at the other end of the throne room. She motioned for everyone follow her, leading the way and stopping only when she reached the railing.

"Mime mime," Mime Jr. said as it jumped up onto the stone railing, small features lit up by the glowing crystals around them.

Lady Ilene motioned for Ash to come to her side, and said, "Though it looks like a large tree, that is actually a stone formation." She pointed towards a silhouette in the distance that almost blended in with the night sky, clouds and fog blocking most of it from view.

"That's amazing," Brock said in awe.

"It's beautiful from here," May agreed as Max gasped in awe.

Ash didn't say anything his dark brown eyes already locked on the rock formation in the distance. He knew exactly where this was going.

"Because of its great age, our ancestors called it the Tree of Beginning," the old lady explained.

"The Tree of Beginning, huh?" Ash said, his voice tense and serious, earning worried looks from all of his friends.

"That is where you'll find Mew," Lady Ilene explained.

Clenching his fists again, Ash nodded his head, his eyes never leaving the shadowed structure. Already any of his friends could see the determination on his face and knew that this was once again a challenge he would never back down from. Ash Ketchum didn't know how to say no to something like this.

"You must remember that Mew can change its form to look like any Pokemon in the world," Lady Ilene warned him. "It rarely shows its true form to humans, so you may have trouble recognizing it."

May sighed and said, "How do we find it and Pikachu then?"

"Yeah," Max agreed. "It could walk right by us, and we'd never know."

The lady-In-waiting smiled at them and said, "The legend says that Lucario could lead the Guardian to anyone, because it had learned the power to see the aura inside all things."

That caught Ash's attention, and not just because of the implication that Lucario could help him find Pikachu. What she said, seeing the aura inside of things, struck something in him, and he remembered how earlier he could almost see things without actually being able to see them.

"Lucario," Lady Ilene said, "do you have the ability to see the aura inside things?"

"Yes, I do," he answered with a nod.

She turned to face him and asked, "Could you lead Ash on his journey to find Mew?"

Lucario hesitated as he felt another presence coming up behind him, but once he realized it wasn't a threat, his eyes turned to look at Ash for a moment, studying the young teenager, before nodding his head at Lady Ilene. Bowing to her like he did earlier, he said, "If that is your wish, it would be my honour."

Misty, who remained silent throughout the entire exchange, looked up as Kidd came onto the balcony, or at least, she thought it was Kidd. She was wearing a completely ridiculous outfit made of shiny, magenta fabric, with matching knee and elbow pads, black outlining the whole thing. The most ridiculous part of her getup though was her hair. It was long and beautiful when it was down, but she had it in two pigtails that stuck out for no apparent reason. Misty made a face, finding that the girl looked more like some adventure-themed hooker than anything else.

At that thought, Misty came to the conclusion that she needed to get away from her older sisters.

"Hey Ash, I'm coming with you to the Tree of Beginning too," she said, her voice demanding and leaving no room for argument.

"You are?" Ash asked hesitantly as he exchanged a confused look with May. They didn't even know this girl.

Apparently Brock did, if his sudden yell was any indicator. Mime Jr picked up on it, mimicking every move Brock made. "Ahh! Wait a second! I know you! You're Kidd Summers!"

"Mime! Mime mime mime! Mime mime mime! Mime mime mime!"

Brock rushed forward, Mime Jr moving beside him, still mimicking him. Brock grabbed her hands into his own, shaking them excitedly. "I've seen you on TV before, but you're much more captivating in person! I've your biggest fan! Please forgive me for not recognizing you right away! My love must have blinded me!"

"Mime mime!"

Misty didn't know what to make of the situation, and neither did Max, since neither of them moved forward to stop Brock. Ash just gazed on with a confused and slightly annoyed expression, while May innocently asked, "She's famous?"

Brock shot around so quickly that it actually startled them all, and causing Misty who was standing the closest to him, to take a step back, stumbling a bit over her dress, but Ash reached out to stop her from falling, sending her an amused look as they all turned their attention back to Brock.

"Hello!" The oldest of the group yelled at them angrily, but his expression cleared quickly as he pulled his guide book out of nowhere. "Kidd Summers has set a world record for setting the most word records, aaand..." He held the book out to them, "...she's soared hired, dived deeper, and

space traveled farther than any human being in history! Kidd's also a surfing expert, a gourmet cook, and a badminton champ! To say that she's a super woman is the understatement of the century!" He spun around to look at Kidd again, holding his hands out like he was presenting her to the group. "She's super duper!"

Kidd laughed weakly at him, and Misty rolled her eyes.

"It'd be great to have you with us, Kidd. As long as we can find a cage for Brock," Max joked.

"I agree," May said with a laugh.

Ash looked over at Misty and asked, "Are you coming? Don't feel like you have to..." He trailed off, not really sure what to say.

Misty grinned and winked at him, "You bet I am. Besides, who's going to rescue you when you get into trouble again if I don't go?" Yes, she said when, not if he got into trouble, because this whole thing just spelled disaster, and she knew there was no avoiding it. Ash Ketchum was a trouble magnet, and this was usually how it started. Misty just hoped that they didn't find some sort of ancient prophecy that just happened to be about him.

Ash smiled at her before turning his attention to Kidd, who moved over to sit on the balcony. "I came here to study the Tree of Beginning and solve the mystery of what it really is." She turned to them and smiled broadly. "Yet another first for me."

"Yet another first for me," Misty mocked quietly, not sure if she liked this older girl or not. She wouldn't be outwardly mean, because there was no way that this girl would be anything like Melody or Bianca. Ash was far too young for her.

"And I can help you!" Brock cried out excitedly

"As long as you don't get in my way," Kidd replied teasingly.

"Yes sir, ma'am!" Brock said with a salute.

"We're going to find Pikachu, Brock," Misty said blankly.

"Yeah, but we'll be doing both at the same time!"

Misty just shook her head at him and held up her fingers so that he could see. Brock's hand instantly went to his ear and he cringed, though she didn't even touch him.

Ash smiled weakly at them all before turning away, staring back at the Tree of Beginning, his smile melting away as he did, being replaced by a worried look.

May noticed this, and stared at him for a moment before smiling and saying, "You know, I bet Pikachu is having a lot of fun with Mew. Maybe even Meowth too."

"Maybe," Ash said with a shrug. "But I'm still worried."

May tilted her head slightly, sapphire eyes flashing uncertainly before she asked, "You said earlier that you'd seen a Mew before. Did it really try to...kill you?"

Ash thought for a moment, trying to work through the blurred memories. As he tried to remember, he recalled Mewtwo taking the memories of him and everyone else involved with the incident away. It wasn't the first time that these specific memories flashed in his mind. Whatever was

happening now, it seemed to be really clearing his mind, allowing him to remember more. "Not intentionally. She saved me, actually. She was really nice and playful, which was really out of place because...well there was another Pokemon there that wasn't quite as nice. They fought one another and...the Pokemon were fighting so viciously. Their abilities were blocked, so all they could do was hit, claw, and bite at one another. It was horrible." Ash frowned and looked down at his hands. "I tried to stop it and got caught between the two psychic attacks and then...well, I don't remember. The next thing I knew, I woke up and Pikachu was there. I was so sore and tired; I couldn't remember what happened but...but I think I was gone." He shook his head at May's horrified look. "That was a long time ago now. This Mew probably won't hurt Pikachu, but I'm not going to relax until I get him back." He was a bit stunned with himself. The memories came back to him as he spoke, and he was surprised at how much he could recall.

May stared at him, not really sure what to say. She looked around, back at all the other Pokemon who stayed inside of the throne room, watching them silently. She clenched her hands into fists and said, "Well, no point waiting! Let's get changed into our normal clothes and get going!"

Ash smiled at her enthusiasm, and nodded his head, "Yeah." He looked back at the Tree of Beginning one last time before going inside. "Don't worry, Pikachu, we're coming."

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As much fun as Misty had being dressed up, she was relieved to pull on her clothes again, enjoying the feel of her shorts over the dress. She checked on her pokeballs as she folded her dress and accessories into her bag, sure that her sisters would be delighted to see it. She was about to pull her hair up into a ponytail again when she heard a thump from outside of her door.

Moving quickly Misty opened the door and saw Max rubbing his arm. "Are you okay?"

"Ah! Oh, Misty, you scared me," Max said with a laugh, though he seemed embarrassed. "I just ran into the table. Wasn't looking where I was going. Is May ready yet?"

Misty looked back at the closed bathroom door where May vanished into earlier, and shrugged. "I don't know. Are Brock and Ash ready?"

"Yeah. Brock's following Kidd around," Max said while rolling his eyes. "She can handle herself though. I..." His expression dropped a bit. "I'm a bit worried about Ash. He's normally not this...broody."

"He's just worried about Pikachu," Misty said while putting her hand on the top of Max's blue hair. "Don't worry, I'll go talk to him. You get your sister moving."

"Can do," Max said, sounding a little more cheerful as he rushed into the room. Misty smiled, shaking her head a bit, as she grabbed her bag and left the room in search of her friend.

An excited thrill went through her, because as much as she was worried about Pikachu, this was another adventure, something she'd been craving for a while. It was no doubt be dangerous, but an exciting adventure would do her good from time to time.

She headed towards the front doors rather than going to the room that Ash was given. As the actual winner of the tournament, he got his own room while they got paired into twos, but none of them complained about it. She figured that he'd be more likely waiting for them to get moving than waiting around his room.

Misty caught sight of him exactly where she thought he'd be and had to applaud herself for still

knowing him well enough to predict his actions. She walked down the stairs towards him, catching his attention, and he stopped the pacing that he'd been doing for a while.

"Is everyone else ready?"

"They'll be down in a minute," Misty said with a nod, a frown working its way onto her face. "Ash, Pikachu will be okay. You know that, right?"

Ash looked away from her and said, "I'm a horrible trainer. Who doesn't even worry a bit when all their Pokemon wander off?"

"You are not a horrible trainer. We all thought that they were okay here," she argued. It was true; Ash wasn't the only one who didn't blink twice when the Pokemon weren't around.

"But Misty, this always happens. I mean, Team Rocket's even here. They always trick us, and they shouldn't, and I'm worried about Pikachu, and I don't understand what's happening to me. I don't get how I unlocked Lucario, or how I know where he is now, or how I can still sort of see things with my eyes closed, and I feel so strange and don't say it's growing up because it's not, because I didn't feel this in the morning. This weird stuff always happens to me, and I don't know why." His eyes were wide with panic. "What's happening?"

Misty had no idea what he was rambling on about, and if they were older, she'd be worrying about him having a midlife crisis. She wondered if there was such a thing as an early-life crisis too, because that would explain a lot. He really seemed bothered about whatever was on his mind. The one thing that she did register was one of the last things he said. It was true; weird stuff always did seem to happen to him; way too often to truly be a coincidence. Region to region, group to group, Ash was always pulled into adventures with life-threatening, world-ending consequences, and he was always the one who had to help fix the problem.

"Okay, calm down," Misty said to him sternly. "What in Mew's name are you going on about?" She remembered earlier (it felt like days ago instead of hours) when he asked them to hold the staff to see if they felt anything strange. That must have been what he was talking about. The energy from when Lucario was released must have been messing with him a bit.

Lost in her thoughts, she hadn't even realized that Ash turned away, staring out into the darkness at something else until he walked away from her. "Hey, where are you going?"

"I'll be back in just a sec!"

Misty huffed angrily. As much as she thought she understood that boy, everything about him was truly perplexing.

...

Lucario didn't know what to make of the whole situation he was in. It was hard to accept that he was thrown into a whole new world, that what he remembered as only yesterday was now ancient history. There were small things that were similar though, such as Lady Ilene. While she wasn't Lady Rin, she was very similar and he was thankful for that. Everything else was so different, but there was one thing that he found, strangely enough, rather soothing. It was having another person with such a strong aura around.

He was used to Sir Aaron's presence, traitor or not. The times when he was without his Master left him feeling a little alone, because as a user of aura, he was always aware of other auras and having a strong one around was almost comforting.

The boy who released him, Ash, was somewhat of an enigma in Lucario's mind. His presence felt almost exactly like Sir Aaron's, his aura shining bright enough for any aura user to notice it. He seemed to be completely unaware of his abilities, but the power wasn't innate. He'd used it before, though Lucario suspected that it might have been subconsciously. It wasn't uncommon for an aura user's abilities to grow in leaps and bounds when they were introduced to others who were already trained to use aura or things that could channel it like the crystals around the castle. Surely the boy noticed something strange happening to him now. Aura users used to be trained exclusively around Cameron Palace, since the natural aura there was much, much stronger than most other places, bringing out abilities that the users didn't even know they had.

There was also the boy's proclaimed bond with the Pokemon they were going to look for. Lucario trusted Sir Aaron, who turned out to be a traitor in the end, so how could he trust this younger, inexperienced, volatile human?

Lucario entered a darkened room, not bothering to turn on the lights, staring up at the picture of Sir Aaron that was in the ballroom. He didn't know what to make of the situation because history said something completely different from what he knew, and then there was the boy who not only had the same aura as Sir Aaron's, but similar looks as well.

He felt the presence coming towards him before he heard the footsteps, and though Lucario knew who it was, he felt the need to leave a warning. He jumped up onto the wall, watching as the teenage boy walked into the room, looking around the darkness.

Lucario moved quickly, jumping down and tackling the boy, causing his hat to fly off of his head and land on the floor. Lucario's arm was around Ash's neck as the boy struggled, but not enough to hurt him. It was just a warning.

Ash struggled against the grip of his attacker. He vaguely realized that it was Lucario holding onto him, but his mind was panicking over everything else.

Lucario finally let go, and Ash took in a deep breath before twisting around and growling, "Why did you do that?"

"You snuck up behind me. That is always a mistake," Lucario answered, the warning as clear as the moon that night.

Ash stared at the Pokemon curiously before saying, "Hey, Lucario..." He was going to ask about the whole aura thing, but lost the nerve to do it. He might get some answers, but he wasn't sure if he really wanted them yet. "I'm really glad you're coming along to help me find Pikachu."

Lucario looked over his shoulder at Ash and asked, "This Pikachu, are you its Master?"

"Master?" Ash repeated, slightly startled by the term. Sure, he wanted to be a Pokemon Master, but he didn't believe that the title made him a Master over Pokemon, like a ruler where they were forced to listen to him. The thought of that seemed wrong, but Pokemon Best Partner In The World didn't have the same ring to it. A smirk appeared on his lips at the thought of him being Pikachu's Master. He laughed as he went to collect the hat that was knocked off of his head in the attack, putting it behind him already. "Are you kidding? No. Pikachu and I are best friends."

"Friends?" Lucario repeated.

Ash frowned a bit as he brushed off his hat. Lucario sounded like the term was completely foreign to him, and he wondered if Sir Aaron, who was idolized in their time, wasn't what he seemed to be. "Yeah. I mean, on paper I'm his trainer and he's my Pokemon. He belongs to me. In that way I guess you'd be right, but I don't see it like that. All my Pokemon are my friends, and I'd do anything

for them. I help them, and they help me. It's what we do. I'd do anything for any of them, but Pikachu, he has a special place here." As he put his hand over his heart, grinning at Lucario again. "Pikachu and all of my other Pokemon are just as important as my human friends. If one of your friends was lost, you'd want to bring them back too, would you?"

Lucario considered this for a moment before saying, "I don't have any friends, and I don't want any."

Ash watched the Pokemon walk out of the room, not quite sure what to make of him. He shoved his hat back onto his head and grumbled, "Nice attitude." Lucario didn't exactly seem like the friendliest or most open of Pokemon, so he was starting to believe Sir Aaron's story more than the Pokemon's.

Ash moved towards the door and stared up at the sky. He was completely exhausted, but he wasn't lying when he said he wouldn't relax until he got Pikachu back. He clenched his fist and said, "Pikachu's my friend, not my servant, and I'm going to get him back, no matter what it takes."

-End Chapter Four-

Sky

Chapter 5

The closer they got to the Tree of Beginnings, the thicker the fog was. Ash was glad that they weren't walking in it, because he undoubtedly would have gotten them so lost that they'd probably end up back in Hoenn instead of Mew's home.

Lucario didn't seem to have a problem navigating through the thick fog, avoiding any and all obstacles in their way. Kidd drove her large jeep, just barely managing to keep up with the Pokemon, trying to stay in a zone where she could still see him but stay far enough back where she could avoid any obstacles that he moved around at the last minute.

Though there were seats in the back, only the two in the front had seat-belts with them. Kidd was in the driver's seat, her eyes scanning the area in front of them while Brock was in the passenger seat. Though he had a seatbelt on, he held on to the handle above his head because of her rapid and wild driving. The area they were going through wasn't actually a road, so they ran over bumps, holes, rocks, shrubs, and everything in between. In the back of the jeep, May, Max, Misty, and Ash were all squished together, and while the closeness helped them keep each other down while going over big bumps, it was quite cramped.

Ash held onto the door handle with one hand, the other one along the back of the seat so that he wouldn't accidentally elbow Misty again. He'd rather not die at her hands, and the look she gave him the second time it happened clearly stated what she'd do to him if it happened one more time. May was at her side, with Max on the opposite side of her, also holding onto his door handle.

"This fog keeps getting thicker," Kidd spoke up, though she didn't sound particularly worried about that.

"But Lucario can see just fine?" May asked curiously.

"Yeah," Kidd answered with a nod. "It's guided by aura."

"Aura? What is aura anyway?" Max asked curiously. "Ash mentioned aura sphere was a fighting-type attack earlier."

"A rare one at that," Kidd agreed. "Only a few Pokemon in the world can learn it, and most of them are from the Sinnoh region. That's where the Pokemon Lucario, and its former form of Riolu are originally from."

"You seem to know a lot about it," Misty piped up.

"I researched it when coming here, since it's a huge part of Cameron Castle's history. The aura that Lucario is using is different from aura sphere, sort of. The attack, aura sphere, is created by pulling energy from within oneself into a ball that's incredibly powerful. The reason it's classified as a fighting attack is because it seems to have the same strengths and weaknesses as fighting-types do. However, a Pokemon can use the attack aura sphere without truly using aura."

"Well that's confusing," May said. "Hey, Ash didn't Lucario say that the aura that was inside of you was the same as Sir Aaron's?"

"That's true," Ash said slowly. "Do you know anything about that, Kidd?"

"Aura, simply put, is the living essence inside of all creatures" she explained.

"Can you tell me what it looks like then?" Max wondered.

"I think it's supposed to be invisible," Brock piped up.

"Not to everyone," Kidd said with a shake of her head. "Like I said, just because a Pokemon can use aura sphere doesn't make it an aura user. That title belonged mostly to the Aura Guardians in the past, like Sir Aaron. He was the one who apparently passed his skills onto Lucario. The people and Pokemon can manipulate and see aura when no one else can. It's said that even the humans could create shields, their own aura spheres, sense things, see things, and who knows what else. These days, it's a very, very rare gift. In theory, there are only a handful of aura users in the world, and most of them will live most of their lives without knowing, always just assuming they have strong instincts or something. As far as I know, there's only one Aura Guardian alive today, a guy named Riley who lives in Sinnoh."

"So that's how Lucario's getting around," May said eagerly. Her eyes suddenly lit up as she said, "So if Sir Aaron and Ash really are alike, that means..."

"Ash can control aura too!" Max cried out excitedly.

Misty looked around at Ash and said, "That's what you were going on about earlier, isn't it? When you were freaking out in the hall, and when you made us hold the staff to see if we could feel something coming off of it. You were feeling the aura from it. And that's how you tracked Lucario, isn't it?"

Ash looked away, letting out a small yelp as they went over a bump, but the four of them were so crammed together that they only moved a bit. He hesitated before looking at his hand and saying, "I could feel something strange with the staff, and when I first got it, I could hear Lucario talking. I didn't know what to make of it really, but it's not the first time I felt something strange like that." He glanced over at Misty. "Do you remember Shamouti Island?"

"Like I could ever forget it," Misty said with a shudder, and Brock cast them a curious look. That was one of the stories that they didn't really go into detail about. "Why?"

"Those three spheres I had to get. When they got near me it was the same feeling I had when I had that staff, and remember how Melody told us that they never started glowing before, no matter how many people used them for their festival? I know that was a long time ago, but still...it's something I don't think I'll ever forget."

"You know, maybe aura explains things a little bit," Misty said suddenly. "Maybe the Pokemon can sense it a bit too, so that's always why you run into things that are thought to be legends."

"Wow, so Ash can really use aura?" Max asked in awe.

Ash just shrugged, not really sure himself. Now that Kidd explained it more, he was fairly certain that he could, potentially, use aura like Sir Aaron and Lucario, but the idea also frightened him a bit. He just wanted to be a Pokemon Trainer. Never a normal one; he wanted to be the best, but he never asked to end up in potentially world-ending scenarios, and he never asked to have a strange and incredibly rare power. He should have been excited about it, but he couldn't be. He didn't know what was wrong with him, because if he found this out a year ago, he would have been jumping around in joy trying to make something happen.

Distracting his friends from a lack of an answer, they went over a bump that actually did send them flying. Ash felt his face heat up when Misty stumbled forward, practically sitting on him now. May pushed Max off of her and looked around at them, bursting into giggles, since it almost looked like Ash pulled Misty onto his lap because his arm was around her. He seriously hated everyone right then and there, because now, as Misty scrambled off of him, all he could think about was how she hugged him earlier.

With a groan, he slumped back and almost wished that Team Rocket would show up to belt out their latest, stupid motto. He was so lost in his thoughts that he didn't even notice a familiar, flailing red-haired woman behind him or her blue-haired companion pulling her back into the opened trunk.

With Misty blushing, May giggling, Brock looking far too amused, Kidd focusing on the road with a bit of a smile on her face, and Max looking entirely clueless, Ash just wanted to tune everything out. Maybe Kidd could hit a bump hard enough to knock him out. He knew he wasn't going to be that lucky though.

...

They finally had to stop for the night. It was far too late, and they were all exhausted, though Lucario refused to show that. Waking up after thousands of years trapped in a staff had to affect him more than he let on. He stayed away from the group though, who were all spread out between their sleeping bags and the jeep.

Misty, who hadn't expected to be sleeping outdoors, scolded herself for not bringing a sleeping bag with her. Luckily, Kidd was nice enough to let her sleep in the back of the vehicle. Kidd herself was stretched up with her sleeping bag on top the roof, Max claiming it was to keep away from Brock, while Lucario almost seemed to be meditating on a nearby rock.

Misty shifted a bit, shivering as the cold, damp air hit her. She pulled her light blanket closer to her for warmth, but then heard the sound off footsteps approaching. She didn't want to appear weak in any way, so she stilled her shivering and pretended to be asleep. The door opened, and nothing happened for a moment until she heard the sound of a zipper, and then an unfolded sleeping bag was placed on top of her, like a warm blanket.

Misty cracked her eyes open when she heard the door close gently, looking at the blue sleeping bag that now acted like a blanket for her. She recognized it as Ash's and pushed herself up to look out the window. The boy in question was walking away from the group, climbing up onto a boulder and sitting on it. Misty stared at his dejected figure and realized how horrible he felt for losing Pikachu. It made her heart break for him. A bit of movement out of her peripheral caught her attention, and she saw Lucario look over at Ash, slowly getting up and walking towards him.

It wasn't really a cold night; Ash suffered through worse, and he tended to be able to withstand the cold better than some people anyway. He let out a sigh as he looked up at the starry sky, figuring that it had to be about two or three in the morning. He was exhausted, but he couldn't sleep. Every time he closed his eyes, nightmares almost instantly attacked him, and he hated it.

A few glowing crystals to his right caught his attention, and he reached out to them, more than a little surprised when the light seemed to react to him, glowing brighter than before. He jerked his hand back, and it dimmed.

"The aura is very strong with you." Ash jumped, looking over his shoulder at Lucario, his eyes following the Pokemon as he approached the boulder he was on.

"What do you mean?"

"Rare people can use aura, and when trained properly, a Lucario can use it in the same way. Rarely can any other type of Pokemon learn the gift of aura, beyond throwing aura spheres around. You are highly gifted with aura, maybe even more so than Sir Aaron was," Lucario said to him.

"Though your powers are weak and untrained."

"I don't understand, why is this happening now?" Ash asked. "I'm gonna assume that this is something you're born with."

"Yes, though it doesn't necessarily go through families. Only fate chooses who can control aura," Lucario informed him. "When you came to this place, which is much more naturally charged with aura than most places, your mostly dormant abilities started to awaken. This area was used as a training ground for aura users because of that in the past. That is the first key, awakening it. You could create shields and spheres in times of extreme need even now, but it would wear you down fast. The interaction with Sir Aaron's staff only helped unlock your abilities further. I can sense that you've used aura before though, whether you've known it or not at the time."

"That'd be an 'or not'. I never heard about it before coming here." Ash stared at the Pokemon for a moment before looking at the crystals again, moving his hand closer to it before pulling it back, watching as the glow brightened and faded. "Can this hurt someone?"

"Yes. For someone who is untrained, but their powers are awakened, a fit of anger or strong emotions can prompt the power to lash out. It almost happened earlier to you."

That highly alarmed Ash. "What? But—I can't hurt my friends! I don't want to hurt anyone! But...but I can't stop to train. I don't even know if there's anyone who could help me! Is there anything else I can do?"

Lucario let out an unimpressed sound and said, "Aura is a gift, and you should treat it as such."

"I never wanted this," Ash snapped at him.

Turning to walk away from him, Lucario said, "Meditation and learning to control your temper will help. It would be in your best interest to keep it under control. You don't want aura, and you don't deserve it either, but you're stuck with it." He didn't let Ash get in another word, jumping high up on the cliffs around them.

Ash glared heatedly at the Pokemon, turning around and looking out at the silhouette of the Tree of Beginning. If Pikachu were there, he would have stood up for Ash. What right did Lucario have to judge him? Tears built up in his eyes, ones that he tried to hide, though no one was there to see them. People told him that he was an emotional person, which translated to him being a crybaby when he was younger (something Gary was always quick to point out), and he hated the fact that, even when he was almost fourteen, he would still cry.

With his eyes closed, blurred, blue tinted images ran across his vision. It would definitely take some getting used to if he was stuck with this power, though even he could admit that it came in handy. He was already well aware that the presence he found the most familiar was creeping up on him.

"Shouldn't you be asleep?" Ash asked her, not bothering to look back at Misty. Instead, he pulled his cap down to cover his eyes.

"You mean like you should be?" she replied dryly. She was silent for a moment before saying, "We are going to get Pikachu back, even if I have to rip that stupid tree apart myself."

A smile appeared on his face, and he finally looked up at her. His unzipped sleeping bag was around her shoulders, keeping her warm, and her hair was still down, something that he appreciated. She moved closer, pushing him to the side of the boulder (a little more roughly than was necessary, in his opinion), and then made herself comfortable beside him.

Misty looked up at the stars and said, "You can't see them in Cerulean City. There are too many lights."

"I always liked not living in a big city for that reason," he said with a nod. "Too bad you weren't with us when we saw the Millennium Comet. It was amazing."

"So you bragged already," she said glumly. "I would have loved to see it. And Jirachi. I heard that May's lullaby was really pretty too. Or so Max said, under oath of it never being repeated again."

"When did he tell you that?" Ash asked her, a smile playing on his face.

"One of those times you called, and everyone else pushed you out of the way," she said with a nod. Misty looked thoughtful, almost hesitant to speak, but managed to make herself do it anyway.

"Ash, do you ever wish we just hadn't stopped in Viridian City that day? After Johto? That we just kept going, and I never got that call?"

"More than you know," he admitted hesitantly. It wasn't easy having a serious conversation with her, though it wasn't like they didn't happen at all. They traveled together for nearly three years, and though they fought a lot, they did tend to have friendly and sometimes serious conversations as well. He laughed a bit and said, "You know, I thought about getting Pikachu to fry that bike the second I saw it."

"You did not."

"I did," he said, his smile fading. "I know we fought and said horrible, horrible things to each other, but I never wanted you to leave. Well, in the beginning I did, but by the time we reached Pewter City, I was pretty much used to having you around."

"You hid it pretty well."

"Misty, I was ten," he stressed to her. There was silence before he laughed and said, "I'm talking like I'm some all-knowing adult or something. Like ten was so long ago."

"Maybe not in age, but in experience, it is," she said with a nod. "Think about it. The people who didn't leave home when they were 10 don't grow up as fast as we do. We have to learn to survive, to take care of others, to make something of ourselves. Those who don't go home."

"Did you know only three people from Pallet are chosen to get the starter Pokemon and leave each year?" Ash said suddenly. He didn't give her a chance to answer. "The year I left was a little strange, because there were four of us. We had to take classes outside of our normal classes on how to care for Pokemon, survival, and things like that. Only the top three in the class were chosen. As you can guess, Gary Oak came in first place. He was always a know-it-all. He acts cool, but he was always the nerd around school." Ash smiled at that. "Second was Leaf Shade. I used to make fun of her name so bad. She, Gary, and I were actually really close friends. It's funny, 'cause our parents were too. Well, my dad, his dad, and her mom were. I came in third that year, but I tied with someone. It was a complete tie across the board, and that never happened before."

"You're kidding, right?" Misty said with a laugh. "I never knew that."

"And as soon as I left, I was determined to forget all those hours of grueling work," he said with a nod. "And I did." He paused thoughtfully. "You know, if that wouldn't have happened, I never would have met Pikachu. And I probably wouldn't have met you. If I woke up early, I probably would have gotten the Squirtle I wanted, who would have listened to me."

"And if you wouldn't have ruined my bike, I wouldn't have met my best friend," she said softly.

Ash's smile turned into an odd look when she added, "I mean, how else would I have met Togepi? No one else would have been dense enough to almost get eaten by an Aerodactyl and find an egg in the process."

"Ha ha, you're hilarious," he said with a yawn.

"Get some sleep, Ash," Misty told him sternly. That voice worked on him in the past when he was really tired or sick, but this time he just shook his head. Deciding that she would have to wear him out more, she said, "Well, you said there was four of you, right? You got Pikachu, and Gary got Squirtle, but who got the other two?"

"Leaf took Bulbasaur, and Joey took Charmander," Ash told her. He looked thoughtful as he said, "But, from what I know, Joey kind of went a bit crazy. He was originally from Johto, but moved over to Kanto a year before we needed to take the classes. He couldn't really take being a trainer, but instead of going home, he hung around Pallet and made friends with a bunch of Rattata, he even traded his Charmander for one. Kinda sad, 'cause he got a few different badges too."

"You're kidding, right?" Misty asked, completely in awe.

"No," Ash shook his head. "I actually bumped into Leaf on my way home after we split up. It was only for a little bit, because she was going in the opposite direction. Anyway, she led me to Joey, who was planning on going to Johto so he and his Rattata could take on the trainers there. He went on about how his Rattata was in the top percentage of all Rattata, and I don't even know what that means. He's insane. Won't even evolve 'em. Leaf was going to help Joey get to Johto okay. You know, since he only has Rattata."

"Wow, hard to believe you're one of the sane ones to come from Pallet," Misty said with a shake of her head. "Though, you know, if you're awake for more than 72 hours straight, you can be proven clinically insane."

"You made that up."

"I did not."

"Did too."

"Did not!"

"Did too!"

"Shut up!" Brock cried out, and they both looked around to see that he was awake, glaring at them one minute, before falling back asleep the next. No one else stirred a bit.

"You have my sleeping bag," Ash said, as if that concluded the argument about why he couldn't go to sleep. "And I'm not taking it back, because you looked cold."

Misty hesitated before grabbing his arm and pulling him off of the boulder. They sat down in front of it instead, and she took the sleeping bag from around her, pressing herself close against his side as she wrapped it around both of them. They both blushed heavily, but she said, "And I'm not moving, because you looked cold. Besides, I'll keep you safe from those nasty nightmares."

Ash gave her a surprised look, positive that he hadn't mentioned anything about nightmares before. She just winked at him and curled up against his side more. He shifted a bit, feeling something sharp poking his back, pulling one of the crystals from the ground and holding it in front of them, the small stone glowing brightly.

"You really can use aura, can't you?" she asked tiredly.

"Apparently."

She took the crystal from him, watching as the light dimmed in it. She tossed it away and said, "That would have made an awesome pendant for a necklace, you know. This type of crystal. That way I'd know when you were around because it'd be glowing." Her head falling to his shoulder as she once again succumbed to sleep.

Ash stared at her, his exhaustion hitting him hard. He was so tired he couldn't be embarrassed about their sleeping position. Instead, he moved his arm around her so it wasn't pinned to his side uncomfortably, and said, "Night, Mist. Thanks."

Lucario watched them curiously from above before he settled back into a sitting position to get some rest of his own.

...

Brock always woke up early in the morning. He was used to it, after having to take care of his brothers and sisters for so long. He usually let everyone else sleep in a little longer, but noticed that he wasn't the only one awake that day. Lucario was already up, as was Kidd, who was packing a few things into the back of her jeep. He frowned a bit when he saw that she had the back door open and was tossing things behind the seat. He wasn't surprised to see that, she explained that something was wrong with the latch on her trunk the night before, but he was a bit worried about where Misty was.

"Hey Kidd," Brock said, fighting every instinct in his body that said to jump and grab her hand. "Did Misty wake up early?"

"Oh, no, she's over there," Kidd said, nodding her head towards a large boulder. "You don't remember yelling at her and Ash to shut up when they were arguing last night? I'm surprised May and Max slept through it."

"They could sleep through anything," he said with a sigh and shook his head. "No, I don't remember that. Guess it's just instinct now. I'm going to fix up breakfast. Is there anything you're allergic to?"

"Nope. And thanks."

Brock nodded his head and made his way over to the boulder, unable to stop himself from grinning broadly when he saw Ash and Misty curled up together. Over the past few months, he acknowledged that Ash was growing up, becoming a little less dense and a little more aware of the people around him. When a few girls would flirt with him, instead of sheer obliviousness, Brock saw recognition in his eyes, but he faked being completely clueless about it. He couldn't hold that against him, he wasn't quite fourteen yet, but when they first met, Brock himself was only fifteen, a little over a year older, and he was head over heels for beauties like Nurse Joy and Officer Jenny. Brock wasn't sure if he should be surprised or not that Ash and Misty were being so affectionate towards one another, because, while he full-heartedly was rooting for them (always had been, along with Tracey, and, strangely enough, Team Rocket), he knew that they were both incredibly stubborn.

Deciding to spare his friends some teasing that day (since he knew that while he could keep quiet about it, May and Max would not), he knelt down beside Ash and gently shook his shoulder. "Hey big guy, time to get up." Waking up Ash, while difficult at times, was always better than waking up Misty. He always made that Ash's job when they traveled together to avoid her wrath. His

younger friend could take it.

Ash groaned, his eyes opening slowly. He was a bit disoriented, and Brock instantly knew that he didn't get much sleep. Not that he was surprised. Ash always put his Pokemon and his friends before himself when it came down to it. "Brock? What time is it?"

"Early," Brock answered. "I'd let you sleep in longer, but I figure you'd rather get going soon. Plus I didn't think you'd want May and Max to see this." He motioned towards Misty.

Ash only seemed to realize that the redhead was curled up at his side under the same blanket as him, her head resting on his shoulder, when Brock pointed it out, his entire face going red.

Brock just chuckled a bit and got up. "I'll leave her to you." He took a few steps to walk away from them, but then turned back around and said, "Ash?"

"Yeah, Brock?"

"I know you're not where she is yet, so just don't hurt her, okay?" He wasn't going to clarify that, because when Ash understood it was when the words really counted for something. He had two more kids to wake up and a breakfast to make.

Ash stared at his retreating figure with pure confusion, because as far as he knew, Misty was the one that hurt him on a routine basis. Brock was just being weird. Still, he had a point about not wanting May and Max to see them, so he moved his arm from around Misty's shoulders and shook her a bit. "Wake up, Mist."

"Don't wanna," she mumbled, leaning against him a little heavier.

Ash sighed before pulling a long piece of grass from the ground. A devious smirk appeared on his face as he managed to sit her upright and moved out of his sleeping bag away from her before running the blade of grass up and down her arm. "Caterpie, get away from Misty."

"Ahh!" Misty shrieked, instantly launching up from the ground and swirling around on the spot, brushing her arms from the "Caterpie" that had crawled on her arm. Her scream was enough to jerk May and Max from their sleep, both looking around wildly.

Ash laughed. Sure, he still missed Pikachu, he was still really confused about what was happening with this strange power, and his changing interactions with the screaming girl, but he couldn't stop himself from laughing.

Misty looked at him, and a shocked look of realization appeared on her face. After years of knowing her though, he wasn't stupid enough to even look away from her for a split second, though he kept laughing. As pure rage filtered into her expression, anyone else would have called him suicidal. He braced himself, knowing exactly what was coming.

"Ash Ketchum!" Misty screamed, fire practically burning in her eyes. "I'm going to murder you!" She lunged at him, and he ran as fast as his legs could take him, laughing the entire time. "Come back here, you little twerp!" Misty yelled as she gave chase.

Lucario jumped from the high cliffs that he spent the night on, settling on another boulder while watching the two, not quite sure what was going on. Why was this boy, Ash, laughing, when the girl looked like she wanted to rip him to pieces?

"Should we help him?" May asked, still a little stunned from the abrupt awakening.

"You want her to catch him," Brock said, already well into making breakfast.

"Why?" Max asked slowly.

"Because if she doesn't, they'll be at each other's throats all day."

Kidd watched the two for a moment before laughing a bit and shaking her head. "Watching young teenagers flirt with each other is always amusing."

Max adjusted his glasses on the bridge of his nose as he paused in rolling up his sleeping bag, watching the two for a moment. He winced when Misty finally managed to tackle Ash, but the boy managed to grab her wrists to stop her from hitting him. "If that's flirting, I don't want anything to do with it."

"I wouldn't worry about that, Max," Brock assured him. "You're brighter than Ash and calmer than Misty."

Lucario watched the two a little closer than necessary. He wanted to be alert, just in case the boy's aura actually went out of control. From the night before, he figured that this strange boy would probably be devastated if he hurt anyone of his human friends. They didn't seem to be actually fighting with one another though.

"That was really mean," Misty said sternly to him when she finally got up, using his stomach to push herself up, purposely knocking the wind out of him.

"I should have snuck carrots and peppers into your food first," he replied, coughing a bit as he got his breathing under control again.

"Now you're just being an ass."

"Misty! There are children here!" Ash cried out dramatically, waving at Max, who hadn't heard a word they said until that, looking over at them oddly.

"Well, at least you can admit what you are."

Ash rolled his eyes and got up, brushing the grass off of his black t-shirt with an orange, horizontal stripe across it. "You're only like a month older than me. Stop letting it go to your head."

"I'm basing it on maturity."

"Whatever." He waved his arms around before holding his hand out to her. She stared at him suspiciously for a moment before reaching out and letting him pull her up. Ash quickly retreated, going to get his discarded sleeping bag and the blanket that Kidd gave Misty the night before.

The redhead walked over to the temporary camp and said, "That smells good. It's been a while since I've had your cooking."

"Don't worry, I'm pulling out all the stops," Brock said cheerfully to her.

"I wonder why," Misty said sarcastically, sea green eyes glancing over at Kidd quickly.

"Are they not even going to acknowledge what just happened?" Max asked, looking up at his older sister with confusion.

"I think we better just leave that alone," May said weakly, though she seemed just as flabbergasted as he was.

Finally, once everything else was packed up aside from a foldable picnic table and Brock's portable

cutting board, the young man announced, "Breakfast is finally ready." He started passing out the six plates, having noted earlier that Lucario was eating the berries around and didn't seem even remotely interested in this food. When he went to grab the plate he specially made for Kidd, he was a bit surprised to see that it was gone. "What?"

"Bonsly bonsly bonsly."

He knelt down to look under the table, staring with surprise at the tiny tree-like Pokemon that was happily eating away at Kidd's breakfast. He stared at it curiously, swearing that it reminded him of something else, though he was sure he'd never seen this specific Pokemon before. It was possibly a baby Pokemon of something he'd seen before, from one of the types that kept their young relatively hidden. "What kind of Pokemon are you?" It suddenly clicked in his mind what it was doing, and he snapped, "Back off! I made that especially for Kidd!"

The Pokemon backed away, and burst into tears, much to Brock's horror.

"That wasn't nice," Ash said as he knelt down beside him.

"Yeah, you didn't have to yell," May agreed as she squatted down beside Ash, the two of them giving him identical unimpressed looks.

"Whoa!" Max cried out as he appeared on Brock's other side, completely ignoring the other three. "It's a Bonsly! Don't worry, it's just using Fake Tears."

The Pokemon froze, tears instantly stopping when it realized that it was caught in the act. Quickly, it managed to balance the plate it stole on its head and started running away from them. The Bonsly didn't even notice that it was running by Lucario, who grabbed the plate.

"Bon?" it said in confusion as it stopped running, looking up at Lucario warily.

"Don't take things that aren't yours," Lucario said to the smaller Pokemon, but not unkindly. He held out one of the berries that he had been eating and added, "Have this instead."

The Bonsly quickly snatched up the berry and rushed behind the boulder Lucario was sitting on earlier, peering back out at the as it chewed its food.

Lucario stared at it for a moment before looking up at the sky, the fog and clouds starting to clear. "We should go soon."

"Right," Brock said, taking the plate back from him. He passed the one that was meant for him to Kidd, settling on eating on the one that Bonsly went through. It was better than nothing. "Eat fast."

"Will that be a problem for May and Ash?" Misty asked. She stayed seated during the whole fiasco, calmly eating her own breakfast. Neither one even acknowledged her question, instead digging into their food with zeal. It really was like watching two slightly different versions of the same person. She wondered if May was secretly Ash's little sister who'd been adopted.

Misty turned her attention up towards the Tree of Beginning, grinning a bit as the sunlight caused the crystals that dotted the rock formation to glitter brightly. She smile faded a bit. It was beautiful, but for all they knew, that beauty was hiding an injured Pikachu that they needed to find, and soon.

**-End Chapter Five-
Sky**

A Discovery

Kidd's driving, if anything, was worse when she could clearly see where she was going. She tried to avoid the bumps and holes in the ground, but that just flung the four of them in the back seat around more. This time, though Ash and Max had the window seats again, May and Misty switched places at the girl's insistence. At first, Misty was suspicious, but then Max mentioned something about not wanting her and Ash to fight again, and realized that their playful argument that morning (because all past arguments considered, it was playful) didn't sit too well with the Maple siblings, who weren't accustomed to the strangeness that was her friendship with Ash.

It was okay though, because Max's constant questioning about water Pokemon (since neither Ash, May, nor Brock really knew that much about them) kept her mind off of Kidd's crazy driving.

"Lucario sure is fast," May said to Ash, sapphire eyes locked on the Pokemon through the windshield.

"No kidding," he agreed with a nod of his head. He moved over a bit so that he could easily see how quickly Kidd was driving and stared at the speedometer warily. "Good thing too. She'd run him down otherwise."

They went over another bump, and there was a clattering sound above their heads. Ash and May both looked up at the roof of the car, looking back at one other with the same confused looks. A quick glance around showed that no one else heard the noise. Ash just shrugged at her. "Probably just a rock."

"Yeah," she agreed. "I—"

"Watch out!" Brock cried out suddenly, and Kidd slammed on the breaks. Ash, May, Misty, and Max were all jerked roughly, holding on to one another to stop them from flying forward.

"What the hell was that?" Ash asked, breathing heavily, squeezing May's shoulders comfortingly as the young girl trembled a bit beside him. To her credit though, May was trying to calm herself down.

Ash looked around at Misty, who had one arm around Max, holding him tightly, while her other hand grabbed May's. He took the arm that was around May off of her shoulder, leaving his other hand, and reached out to touch Misty's shoulder, who looked over at him with a weak smile.

"We're both okay. You're the one who should watch your language around kids."

He laughed weakly before glancing back down at May, who took a deep breath. "I'm okay now." He let go of her and Misty, and both of them glanced around at the youngest in the group. "Are you hurt, Max?"

"No," he said, though his voice was wary.

"Sorry," Kidd said to them. "Lucario stopped. I didn't want to hit him. Everyone's okay, right?"

"I think I lost ten years of my life, but all around good," Brock said as he breathed in deeply, looking back at his friends with a small smile on his face. His first immediate reaction after the car stopped was to check on them, and he was a bit relieved to see that Ash and Misty were doing a good job comforting the younger May and Max. Though they were only three years older than May, traveling trainers tended to grow quickly, and neither of them were as startled as the younger two.

"Why'd he—" Ash was abruptly cut off when a geyser exploded in front of them, followed by a few other ones.

"A bunch of geysers," Brock said, stating the obvious.

"Yeah, and they seem to be pretty active," Kidd agreed with him. "We're not getting through there right now."

May stared at the gushing water for a moment before glancing back at her brother and Misty, who were both now completely calm and staring out the front window, though she shouldn't have been surprised that Misty was okay. She turned her attention to Ash, who was also staring forward, looking incredibly frustrated that their journey to Pikachu was interrupted yet again. They'd been driving for hours because of the twisted nature of the landscape, and it felt like they were nowhere closer to their destination.

That was when something else caught her attention. She leaned forward a bit to look around Ash, and excitement rushed through her. She lunged forward to get a closer look, causing Ash to let out a startled yelp as she basically jumped on him to look out his window. "Look you guys! Isn't that a hot spring?"

Everyone's attention turned to where she was looking. Excitement rushed through almost everyone in the jeep when they realized that she was right.

"I think after that bit of excitement, we could use a dip in a hot spring," Kidd said, and Brock nodded eagerly.

"Yeah!" Max agreed, before looking up at Misty. "Oh, do you have a bathing suit with you?"

"A good water Pokemon trainer is always ready to jump into the water," Misty said with a wink.

"But you didn't bring a sleeping bag."

"Yes, well someone told me I wouldn't need it." She looked around at Ash, frowning a bit when she saw his frown. "Ash?"

"Why are we wasting time?" he demanded. He would have folded his arms across his chest, but May was still leaning across him.

"We can't go this way," Kidd said to him. "You guys go relax a bit, I'll work out another route to the tree."

"You sure?" Brock asked her.

"Definitely," she agreed with a nod, winking at him. "I've got resources like you wouldn't believe."

Ash huffed angrily, and Misty said, "Oh, stop pouting."

"Yeah," May agreed, reaching over and pushing open the door, scrambling over him to get out of the vehicle, knocking him out of the door in the process. In a rather ungraceful display for a coordinator, she ended up stumbling over to him and falling onto her stomach on the ground.

"Graceful," Ash said to her, a bit of humour coming back to his voice as he pushed himself up onto his elbows, pulling his legs out from under hers. "Too bad Drew wasn't here to see that, huh?"

"Shut up," May growled at him as she pushed herself off of the ground.

"Drew's her boyfriend, right?" Misty whispered to Max, still in the car.

"Yup," the young boy agreed.

"He is not my boyfriend!" May shrieked before stomping down towards the water.

Lucario made his way over to them, and Kidd said, "I'm going to look for another way around on the map. Once I find something, I'll be sure to show you." He just nodded his head.

Ash got up off of the ground and looked at the hot spring as Misty, Max, and Brock got out of the vehicle. He sighed, smiling weakly as he said, "I guess the Pokemon could use some time to relax. They were a bit freaked out by what happened with Mew too." He shot a wary look at Misty. "Please no Gyarados."

"Don't worry, I don't think that water's deep enough for him," she said, grabbing her bag and going around the jeep. "Hey May, you might want to get changed out of sight!"

The younger girl looked around and nodded, running back to where Misty was. The three boys were quick to change into their swimming trunks on the opposite side of the jeep.

Brock quickly released his Fortress and Mudkip, the water Pokemon instantly letting out a thrill as it jumped into the warm water, his trainer laughing and following after it. There were flashes of light that came from the other side of the jeep, and Combuskin, Munchlax, and Squirtle all appeared, all three quickly following Mudkip and Brock's example.

"Zu!"

Ash looked down as Azurill appeared beside him, looking around curiously. Corsola and Politoed appeared a moment after, both of them greeting Ash happily before heading to the water. A flash of yellow caught his eye, and he looked around just in time to see Psyduck roll down that hill and into the water, flailing around.

"What's wrong with it?" Max asked him.

"Psyduck still can't swim?" Ash called out to Misty.

"Dumb duck! I told you to wait!" Misty called out from where she was getting changed. "I'm going to get your water wings when I'm done!"

Ash just shook his head and watched as Max went to help Brock save the dopey duck. He felt a nudge at his feet, and looked back down at Azurill. He smiled a bit, holding his arms out as the little Pokemon jumped up into them. Balancing her with one arm, he released Swellow, Corphish, Grovyle, and Phanpy, the three bigger Pokemon eagerly going into the water while Phanpy stayed near the edge.

Ash moved close to the hot spring, sitting down on the edge with Azurill in one arm. He smiled at Phanpy, who came close to his side, nuzzling him and thrilling happily. The small Pokemon, though not the baby that hatched for Ash back in Johto, was still rather playful and affectionate.

"Don't worry, I know you don't like the water. You're a ground-type, after all." He turned his attention to Azurill. "You, on the other hand, should be in there. I know you're a normal-type, but you will be water-type someday."

"Zurill," she said with a laugh, cuddling closer to him. Ash smiled at that, reminded of the times when Togepi would do the same thing when Misty wasn't available (which was rarely ever). Still, all her baby Pokemon seemed to come to him as a second choice, though he never understood why.

When he asked Pikachu about it with Togepi, his electric Pokemon just laughed at him and shook his head.

Splashes of warm water hit him, and Ash laughed as Swellow happily splashed his wings in the water.

May glanced over at Misty, who stuffed her clothes into her bag after she was finished changing. The older girl had her hair down again, wearing a simple blue bikini without a problem. The younger of the two was a bit wary of getting changed outside and opted for changing in the car. It wasn't that she didn't trust the boys; she just didn't trust the boys. Misty didn't care, because if anyone crept on her, she'd punch their lights out.

Once May saw Misty nod to her, the young girl opened the car door to get out, only for something hard to fall on her head.

"Ow," she said, looking down at her arms where the object fell. It was the little Bonsly. "Oh, looks like you decided to tag along, huh?" She laughed. "Okay, come on."

Misty smiled and led the way to the water, looking around briefly when she swore that she heard the trunk close. She stared at it for a moment, but when nothing happened, she just shrugged, deciding that it was the faulty latch again.

As they approached the water, Misty smiled at the sight of her Pokemon happily playing with the others. She sighed as she stared at Psyduck, going over to the Pokemon and putting inflatable water wings on him. "Don't drown."

"Duck?" he said, tilting his head at her.

"Come in, May," Max called out to his sister.

"Azurill zu!" Misty turned her attention to the Pokemon, laughing when she saw her balancing on Ash's head.

"She won't go in the water," he said with a shrug.

Misty moved into the water, and the Pokemon quickly jumped off of his head, paddling her small feet to get over to Misty, who scooped her up and grinned at Ash almost tauntingly. Before they could start any sort of argument, their attention was drawn back to the shore.

"Bonsly bons!" Bonsly cried out, jumping from May's arm and running around to hide behind Phanpy.

"Bonsly won't like water," Max said, sounding more amused than anything. "It's a rock-type Pokemon."

"How do you know that," Ash asked him, playfully splashing him. "You said it's from Sinnoh, right?"

"I actually studied," Max said while turning his head up. "You should try it."

Ash just shook his head and pushed himself in the water as May got in. The two siblings splashed each other a bit, and he was happy to see everyone, especially all the Pokemon, in such a good mood, but he couldn't stop the frown from working its way back onto his face.

"Hey, cheer up," Brock said as he came to his side. "We're in a hot spring."

"I'm just...I can't stop thinking about Pikachu," Ash admitted.

"I know," Brock said with a nod. "But he's tough; he'll be okay. Aside from Charizard, he's the best you've got."

"I wish I had Charizard right now," Ash replied wistfully, looking up at the Tree of Beginning. If Charizard was there, he would have flown up there already. He frowned, his voice lowering so that Brock to barely hear him. "I wish they were all still here. I hate saying goodbye to everyone."

Brock observed his normally cheerful friend, wondering where his almost contagious optimism went in the last day. Brock followed Ash's gaze and saw that he was staring at Misty for a moment, who was laughing with May, and he understood then that Ash didn't mean only his Pokemon when he said he wished they were all still there, though they were a large part of it.

Chuckling a bit, Brock splashed Ash slightly, causing the younger boy to look around at him with confusion. "You're not allowed to be a moody teenager, got it? I won't accept that. Go back to being cheerful. At least for them." He nodded at the others. "It doesn't look right on you." Ash stared at him oddly, before a genuine smile appeared on his face and he let out a laugh. This seemed to give his Pokemon more energy, Corphish and Swellow splashing him as he splashed them back while Grovyle watched from the water and Phanpy from the shore with Bonsly.

Misty looked around at them, grinning a bit when she saw that he didn't look nearly as depressed anymore. Whatever Brock said certainly seemed to have gotten through to him.

Once she was sure that Psyduck wasn't going to drown (thanks to his water wings, Mudkip, and Squirtle), she moved through the shallow water and nudged Ash a bit. She smiled at him and said, "Don't be depressed. It doesn't suit you. I mean it. I can and will beat you."

"I have no doubt about that," Ash laughed at her, splashing her.

Misty intended on keeping her short hair dry, and here this little punk she splashed her enough to get it wet. Her sea green eyes narrowed and she said, "Oh, it's on." She splashed the water back at him. "You're messing with a Water Master!"

"Sorry, Miss-Wanna-Be-Water-Pokemon-Master. Didn't know that someone who wants to specialize in water couldn't handle getting wet." His voice was challenging, smug, and amused all at the same time. Max and May both looked a little wary, but Brock seemed perfectly content. He knew this one wasn't going to turn into an all-out brawl, not this time, at least.

Her mouth fell open and she said, "You did not just throw that nickname back at me."

"I think I did."

They stared at one another for a moment before Misty suddenly jumped forward, tackling Ash and causing him to let out a yelp before they started fighting in the water, not out to actually fight and hurt one another.

May stared at them for a moment, not quite sure what she was looking at, and Max once again decided that he wanted nothing to do with flirting, if that's what this was. May and Drew fought a lot too, so that must be what flirting consisted of. It certainly wasn't what Brock did to the Joys and Jennys of the world.

Trying to distract himself, the young boy looked around, spotting Lucario standing up on a large boulder on the bank, staring at the water, almost mesmerized. He tilted his head a bit before calling out, "Hey, Lucario! Why don't you come in? The water's great!"

Lucario looked down at them before turning around and jumping off of the boulder, walking out of sight. Max stared at its retreating figure, wondering what was wrong with it. Maybe it just didn't like baths, Max himself wasn't always fond of them either, so he understood.

"Hey guys! Look at this!" May called out suddenly. Max moved towards his sister, as did Ash and Misty, once their play-fighting came to an end.

"What is it, May?" Ash asked her curiously.

"Look up there!" She said, pointing up the steep slope of rocks. They all followed her gaze, and saw that she was pointing to strange, crystalline object high on the ledge. "I think it's a flower."

"It does look like one, doesn't it?" Misty agreed. "It's really pretty. Too bad we can't get a closer look."

Ash looked up at the flower, eyeing the grooves in the cliff. If there was one thing he had always been superior in compared to (almost) everyone he knew, it was climbing, having been compared to nearly every monkey or climbing Pokemon in existence. He moved towards the cliff and said, "Well, only one way to find out what it is."

"Ash is a good climber," Kidd noted as she moved over to the water, kicking off her boots and slipping her feet in just beside Brock. She let out a relieved sigh, a bit stressed from trying to find another route to travel, though she was pretty sure that she found one. She ran it by Lucario already, who was meditating to see if it would actually be a good way to go. Now it was time to relax.

"Yeah," Brock said with a laugh as he watched his friend. "A human Aipom."

"If you fall, I'm not helping you," Misty warned him, though everyone knew that wasn't true. Just the way she was watching his movements like a mother Ursaring was enough proof of that.

Ash ignored them, getting up to the small ledge that the flower was on. He stared at it for a moment, not quite sure what to make of it. It was certainly pretty, but he'd never seen anything like it before. He also got a strange feeling while staring at it, though he couldn't quite explain it.

He reached out to touch it, and the second his skin made contact with the flower, it started to glow, just like the crystals had the night before. It was enough to startle Ash, and he shifted his weight the wrong way. The rock under his feet crumbled, and he let out a yelp, arms scrambling to grab something to stop his fall. The only thing he successfully did was tear the flower out of the ground as he plummeted down towards the water again.

May reached up, catching the flower at the same moment Ash ended up crashing into the water again, splashing all of them in the process. He was up quickly, proving that he was okay, despite the bit of water he was coughing up.

"I didn't ask you to pick the flower, Ash," May said sarcastically as she eyed the boy. He looked strange when his hair was wet and down, not spiked up like it normally was.

"Sorry," he said sheepishly.

"Are you okay?" Misty asked, brow furrowing as she came over to him. "You're not hurt, are you?"

"Only my ego," he admitted with a sigh.

"Oh, well in that case, you're fine. Your ego's big enough to house every person on this planet."

She turned her attention away from him, looking at the flower. "Is it made of crystal? It looks like it."

"Sort of. The root feels like crystal, but the rest feels like...I dunno...like it's so thin that it's bendable," May said, moving the flower around in her hands. She glanced at Ash again and said, "You should plant it again later."

"Okay," he agreed with a small shrug before he made his way back over to Brock, allowing the two girls and Max to admire the flower. He lowered his voice a bit when he got to Kidd and Brock and asked, "You have bandages, right?"

"What did you do?" Brock asked with a sigh.

"My leg stings, so I think I cut it," he admitted, looking back at the others. "I just don't want them to worry."

"No worries, come on, we don't want you bleeding in here much anyway," Brock said, standing up and stepping out of the water. He and Kidd reached out to pull Ash out of the hot spring, and Brock winced at the sight of his leg. It wasn't really bleeding, there were only small dots of blood, but his entire shin was already bruising, the skin scrapped away. It was a good thing that Ash seemed to know he couldn't get away with hiding that, so Brock could get some peroxide and bandages on it. While Ash Ketchum could complain for days about stubbing his toe, he tended to be really quiet about any injury that was above a mild one. Probably why he never complained about almost getting himself killed repeatedly. This time though, he really didn't want to draw attention to himself, so he stayed perfectly still.

"Sorry big guy," Brock said once he was done helping his younger friend. "I think you should stay out of the water for now."

"That's okay," Ash said with a shrug as he got to his feet, heading back towards the jeep to get his clothes and get changed. "I need to find a place to plant that flower anyway before it dies."

No one seemed to realize how long they actually lounged around the hot spring until the sky began to turn a bright orange when the sun started to set. With wrinkly fingers, everyone else left the warmth of the soothing water, putting on their own clothes again.

Misty just finished drying off her own hair, tying it up into a side-ponytail again and walked over to find Ash and Max digging a small hole, May standing in front of them, watching them work with the crystal-like flower in her hands. The little Bonsly that was tagging along with them was standing beside Max, watching curiously.

"That should be deep enough, right?" Max asked.

"Yeah, I think so," Ash said with a nod. "Let's check." He held his hands out, and May passed him the flower. The second that she took her hands away from it, the flower started to glow just like the gemstones had the night before.

"That's weird," May said, sapphire eyes going wide as she watched the flower open up, a glowing sphere of light rising up out of it.

Misty came to her side, not quite sure what to make of this. She was sure it had to do with aura, but she didn't know what it could be.

Blurred images started to appear around them, and Misty took a step back when she realized that she was staring at another Ash, who was in his swimming trunks and up on a ledge. She watched

him fall back, the flower in his hands, before the image vanished, the light disappearing back into the flower as it closed once again.

"What just happened?" Ash asked slowly, brown eyes glancing around, begging for an answer.

Brock and Kidd rushed over to them, the oldest narrowing her eyes a bit as she studied the object in Ash's hands. "I know what this is. You've picked a time flower."

-End of Chapter Six-

Sky

One Problem After Another

Ash stared at the crystalline flower in his hands. Of course something strange had to happen with it. At least this strange thing wouldn't hurt anyone. That was really the only thing that mattered. Not that he really understood what was happening anyway.

"What's a time flower?" Brock asked, voicing the question they were all wondering.

"Legend has it that Sir Aaron could use it to look back into the past," Kidd said, shaking her head with amazement. "I never actually thought it was real."

"I wouldn't believe it if I didn't see it," May said.

"How does it work?" Max wondered, clearly fascinated by this discovery.

"Well, if the legend's true, it responds to someone who can use aura like Sir Aaron and Ash can," Kidd explained. "That was a small glimpse into the past."

"That's amazing," Misty said as she came up to Ash's side and touched the flower. "I wonder if there are more around, and what we could see." She leaned a bit on him to look closely at the flower. Ash tensed up a little bit from the close proximity before calming down a bit. He knew it was just Misty, but pretty much everything was making him a bit jittery at the moment.

Ash knelt back down, wincing a little bit as his injured leg pressed against the ground again. He made sure that the flower was going to stay put and was glad to see that it seemed stable once all of the dirt was filled in.

"It gets dark pretty quickly here, doesn't it?" Kidd asked as she turned her attention up at the darkening sky. "We can probably get a little closer to the tree before we need to stop for the night, but only if we get going now." She turned around to look at the always present but silent Lucario.

"You remember the way we're going?"

"Yes," he answered with a nod. "We should be able to get through that way."

"Okay, let's get going," the young woman said, turning back and heading towards her jeep.

Brock helped Ash to his feet, frowning a little as the younger boy stumbled a bit. "Is your leg okay?"

"Yeah, I've had worse," Ash replied, sounding glum again. "I'm just worried about Pikachu. I can't remember the last time we were apart for so long."

Clapping a hand on his shoulder, Brock said, "We'll get him back. You wait and see. He'll be fine."

Ash smiled weakly and started walking back to the jeep where Max and May were already climbing in.

"What's wrong with his leg?" Misty asked Brock with a frown as she watched him limp slightly.

"Oh, he hurt it when he fell. It's not bad," Brock assured her, knowing how worried she could get, even though she would vehemently deny it. "Come on. We got a bumpy drive ahead."

"I can hardly contain my joy," she quipped sarcastically as she followed him towards the vehicle.

...

The sky was a deep blue with glinting stars when they finally decided to pull over to eat. Brock was quick to delegate duties to everyone so that they could get their campfire set up as quickly as possible. Once the food was ready, the group of six, plus Bonsly, sat around the campfire eating, with Lucario sitting away from them a bit.

"Hey Ash, I have to wonder, was Pikachu your first Pokemon?" Kidd asked suddenly, her aqua eyes looking at him with interest. "You guys seem really close."

Ash smiled at her words and said, "Yeah, he was. Pikachu's been with me through everything. Believe it or not, we didn't always get along."

"Really?" Kidd asked, sounding honestly surprised about that.

Ash chuckled and said, "I'm pretty sure Pikachu despised me from the moment he saw me. See, I'm from Pallet Town, and the three trainers who are chosen to leave from our town every year had a choice between Charmander, Squirtle, and Bulbasaur. My year, there were four of us. I slept in late. Professor Oak had a fourth Pokemon, but he was still a bit reluctant to give him to me. Pikachu was a little...hostile at first. I hugged him, he shocked me. Then refused to go in his pokeball. That's ancient history now."

"So when did things change?" Kidd asked.

"Yeah, Ash," May agreed.

"How did you and Pikachu get to be such good friends when he didn't want anything to do with you?" Max wondered.

Smiling, Ash's dark eyes looked up at the sky, and he seemed to get lost in thought for a few minutes. Misty, who was sitting to his right, nudged him, and playfully said, "Well, it definitely wasn't by putting on rubber gloves and dragging him around by a clothesline, right?"

Ash sighed and said, "I never should have told you that."

"You actually did that?" May asked, sounding both amused and horrified.

"Hey, he was a little jerk back then," Ash said with a shrug. "Besides, we became friends on that first day."

"After he got a flock of Spearow angry at him," Misty spoke up again.

"Hey, stop telling my story." He waved his hands at her. "Yes, after I got a flock of Spearow angry at me. They kind of...attacked us. I didn't want them to hurt Pikachu, so I was going to take the attack for him, but then he came to my rescue, even though he ended up hurt and exhausted in the end. We both were. At that moment though, I knew I could count on him, and he knew the same thing about me."

"Wow, that's a great story Ash," May said with a genuine smile on her face.

"He wasn't the only friend I met that day who hated me at first either," Ash said, a silly grin appearing on his face.

"You caught another Pokemon on your first day?" Max asked. "Which one?"

"I didn't catch a Pokemon. Someone else caught me, right Mist?"

She was a bit surprised that he mentioned meeting her the same day. They were talking about Pikachu, not her. The stories did tie together though, so it made sense in a way. Sensing curious eyes on her, she focused her gaze on her raven-haired friend, narrowing her eyes slightly as she did. "Who could ever forget the day they fished an arrogant, snarky, little brat with an injured Pokemon out of a river?" She held up her hand, pointing at him, though they were sitting fairly close already. "Especially when he steals and demolishes my bike?"

It wasn't Ash who protested the sentence, but Brock. The groan that came out of his mouth made the two look around at him, as he said, "Please, I beg you, no more bike arguments. You got your bike back, Misty."

"From Nurse Joy, not Destructo here."

"Destr—" Ash started, and just from his tone of voice, Brock knew an argument was going to start.

He shook his head and cut the younger boy off. "No. Besides, Misty, you admitted later on that you didn't care about the bike anymore to both of us. You would have lent him that bike to get Pikachu to the Pokemon Center no matter what."

She couldn't deny that. If Ash asked her instead of just grabbing her bike and going, she probably would have insisted that he use it. That wasn't the point though. She was about to speak up when a rather angry voice interrupted her thought.

"You humans are all alike!" Lucario spat out as he stood up. "You can't be trusted."

At first, Ash was confused about where this outburst came from, but then the words actually sunk in his head. With narrowed eyes, he jumped up, moving after the Pokemon quickly. "Hey, wait a second!" He ran around, cutting off Lucario so that they were face to face. "What was that for? We were talking about making friends, and you just flip a sh-crap." He could hear his mother in his head telling him to wash his mouth out with soap. He really needed to stop listening to those older Pokemon trainers who didn't have good attitudes about losing.

"You purposely ignore your gift that could help people and pokemon. You said yourself how cruel you were to that Pokemon. You're selfish and as cold-hearted as any human, maybe even more. You would turn your back on this Pikachu if you had to. If he wasn't beneficial to you."

Many things could be said about Ash Ketchum, but cold-hearted wasn't one of them. He was an emotional, open person, but that came with a downside too, because when Ash got truly angry (Something that rarely happened. He would be the first one to argue, but he was never truly in a rage when he did), he was unable to hold back his rage. It was one of the ways Misty came to realize that he was never truly angry with her. Maybe annoyed and frustrated, but when he was mad, Ash was more likely to lash out at others either verbally or physically.

The last time he felt this much anger towards a Pokemon was a blurred memory half-hidden in his mind, though he was pretty sure that he took a swing at Mewtwo with pretty bad consequences for himself. He never even got this angry at Charizard when he didn't listen, not even when it cost him the battle against Ritchie in the Indigo League. His hand was shaking as it balled into a fist, and he snapped back at Lucario, "I would never, ever abandon Pikachu!"

Turning his nose up at Ash, Lucario said, "Your words mean nothing. Coward."

Misty and Brock both knew what was coming before it happened, and they both tensed up as Ash watched the retreating Lucario, his temper boiling. "How do we know Sir Aaron really abandoned the Queen like you say? Maybe you ran out on them? Yeah, that's probably it. You up and left

when things got hard. Just like you're running away from me now!"

"What did you say?" Lucario snapped as he spun around to face Ash, anger dripping from every audible thought.

"This isn't helping, Ash," May scolded him, but Misty put a hand on her shoulder, shaking her head at the younger girl. She of all people knew how quickly Ash's temper could be transferred from one person to another when he was angry. He would never intentionally hurt a friend, and he would never, ever hit a friend, but that didn't mean he wouldn't say things he didn't mean when he was angry. Misty just prayed that Lucario didn't do anything to push his anger farther.

"How do you know Pikachu didn't run off and desert you?" Lucario asked him before turning to walk away again. "Because it didn't want a coward like you as a Master."

"Take that back!" Ash roared as his temper finally snapped. Brock tried to grab him, but Ash was too quick as he shot after Lucario, tackling it.

Ash didn't really know what he was doing, like someone else was in control of his actions. He wasn't even aware that he rolled down a steep, rocky hill with Lucario, crashing into the stream below. They were fighting, throwing punches at one another. He didn't even see the glow starting to appear on his hand, but Lucario did.

Lucario grabbed Ash, and in a panicked motion, forced him under the water. There'd be less of a chance of someone getting hurt if he lost control of his aura under the water. Ash's aura was far more powerful than the boy seemed to realize, and Lucario didn't want to take any chances with the power lashing out. There were so many crystals around them that would conduct the power that everyone would be hurt. He only intended to keep Ash under the water briefly, keeping a close eye on his air.

Ash didn't notice the aura at all, but it didn't matter, since his panic made it fade as quickly as it came.

That wasn't what anyone else saw though. From where Misty was standing, it looked like Lucario was holding Ash under the water to drown him.

"What are you doing?" she shrieked, skidding down the hill and rushing into the water. Lucario wasn't expecting her, so she was able to push him off Ash without much trouble, causing the Pokemon to stumble back in the water. She helped pull him up, instantly feeling relieved to see that he was conscious and coughing up the water he inhaled. Helping to keep him steady, her sea green eyes narrowed at Lucario as she snapped, "And you call Ash a coward when you just tried to drown him?"

Her temper was notoriously worse than Ash's, though only Brock knew that. She was quicker to snap than he was, but she was just as likely to launch herself at Lucario as the raven-haired boy had. It was an unfortunate day for Brock when he realized that one of their common personality traits was their tempers. He still cringed at the memory.

Ash took several deep breathes, letting himself lean a little bit on Misty. He was having a spectacular week in his mind. He finds out his has some freaky powers he doesn't really want, his first Pokemon and best friend was missing, he hurt his leg, and now his lungs and throat ached because a Pokemon tried to drown him.

Lucario just looked at them for a moment before leaping high out of the water and landing on the hill they just came from. Ash's dark eyes strayed on Lucario for a moment with both anger and confusion. Sure, he swung first and said some pretty hateful things, but was that a reason for

Lucario to try and drown him? His eyes turned down, glancing at the water when he caught sight of his own hand. It was clenched tightly, a faint, pale blue light surrounding it. He let out a small gasp and unclenched his hand, all anger for Lucario holding him under the water leaving. He was losing control, and Lucario saw that and tried to help in a way. Not the best way, but a way. As soon as the thought entered his mind, he knew it was true.

That aside, he was not going to forgive Lucario for what he said about Pikachu, a spike of anger going through him at the thought. His anger was fueling his aura, and he was going to hurt someone, he just knew it. That thought alone was able to dim his anger a bit.

Ash quickly pushed away from Misty, taking a few steps away from her in the water. He faced away from everyone else, clenching his eyes shut with frustration. He opened his eyes a moment later, focusing on the Tree of Beginning. Without saying anything to anyone else, he turned again, making his way back up the steep slope, everyone else following him a moment later.

Misty silently took a towel out of her bag and held it out to Ash, who seemed to take a moment to realize it was in front of him. He shot her a weak grin that didn't last long, pushing the towel to dry off his hair as he walked around the jeep.

Misty's green eyes silently turned to meet Brock's, and he nodded towards her. They were both in silent agreement to let him cool off for a moment. Unfortunately, that agreement wasn't out loud, so May had no way to know about it.

The younger girl followed Ash, planting her hands on her hips when she came up behind him, and said, "That was completely uncalled for."

"He shouldn't have said those things about Pikachu," Ash grumbled, rapidly dragging the towel across his dark hair.

"You said some pretty horrible things to Lucario too," she said sternly, sounding like she was years older than him instead of younger.

Ash hesitated, knowing that her words were true, not quite sure what to say about it. He wasn't even sure if he wanted to acknowledge her at all. Luckily, he didn't have to, since he had a red-haired guardian with him that day.

"Lucario didn't have to try and drown him, no matter what he said," Misty said as she appeared by the two. Though May had no way of knowing that she and Brock agreed not to confront Ash, she was still a bit annoyed that the girl did anyway and was slightly angry that May seemed to be lumping all the blame on Ash. Normally, Misty would have agreed with her, but she tended to side with her dense friend a little more after he was injured badly, or almost injured, so she was giving him a little more leeway than normal.

For what it was worth, May didn't seem to have much to say about that either.

"It's okay, Misty," Ash spoke up finally, looking up at the dark sky. He passed her back her towel, keeping his eyes locked onto the ground as he made his way to the jeep.

"Ash?" she called out, sending him a confused look.

"Lucario wasn't trying to drown me; he was trying to protect all of you."

"From what?" Brock asked as he came around the vehicle, Kidd a few paces behind him.

"From me," Ash answered faintly while shaking his head. "This place is...it's doing weird things to

me, and I can't control it."

"You mean your aura," Misty said.

Ash nodded. "I just...when I'm angry I can't stop it and..." He trailed off when another wave of anger and frustration rushed over him, and, for a split second, there was a visible glow just above his hand, like a little sphere that vanished. Silence fell through the area as he clenched his fist, a bit surprised by what just happened.

Finally, after what seemed like eternal silence, Ash said, "I'm going to go the rest of the way alone."

...

Max watched his sister go to confront Ash about his fight with Lucario, and he took the opportunity to slip away. He didn't really have strong feelings about the fight one way or another. It took two to fight like that, and both sides were guilty in some ways. He wasn't going to let that bother him, because he of all people knew that wishing for something (especially changing time) didn't always help. There were only a few things in life that could make a wish come true, and nothing that would be helping them now.

So instead, he set off in search of Lucario. Max was sure that the Pokemon had a reason for his actions, and he wanted to show that at least one of them wasn't going to be hostile to him, like he assumed both Ash and Misty would be.

With his treasure in hand, Max scoured the area around the camp, sure that Lucario wouldn't have wandered off too far. He was proven correct when he found the Pokemon leaning against a tree, staring up at the night sky.

With a smile on his face, Max walked over to Lucario, who glanced over at him silently. He pulled his gift from behind his back and said, "I brought you some chocolate to help cheer you up." Lucario made a curious sound and turned his attention completely to him, which Max took as an encouraging sign. He snapped the chocolate bar, holding a piece out to the Pokemon. "Have you ever tried chocolate?"

"Never," Lucario answered as he took the sweet from his hand, sniffing at it.

"You're going to love it then," Max said happily. "Not only does it make you feel better, but it tastes yummy too." To show that there was nothing wrong with the chocolate, he snapped off a piece for himself and ate it.

Lucario looked down at his own piece and took a bite of him. Max watched, his grin spreading when he saw Lucario smile at the taste, letting out a satisfied sound.

"See?" Max said happily. "Isn't it great?"

Lucario looked down at him again before asking, "Is he alright?"

"Ash? Yeah, he'll be fine. He bounces back pretty quick," Max answered with a nod. "You know, I've never met a trainer like him before."

"What do you mean?"

"I always admired people who learned the rules of battling, who formulated plans based off of type advantages and strengths, and Ash does do that sometimes, but he does something that I never

really thought about. He cares for each and every one of his Pokemon like they're his friends. They're not his slaves or servants or even his students; they're his equals. He told me once that they help him as much as he helps them, maybe even more. I don't agree with what Ash said to you; it was mean, but you're wrong about him too," Max spoke quickly, wanting to get everything out before he was interrupted. "He's pretty forgiving too, so don't worry about coming back. I'd avoid Misty though. I better get back before May notices I'm gone. I hope you come back too."

As he walked away, Max felt Lucario's eyes on him, and he was positive that he'd done the right thing by confronting the Pokemon.

...

"Give it back, Misty!"

"For the hundredth time, no!"

"Give it back!"

"No!"

The scene that Max walked back into was a curious one. Misty was holding Ash's backpack as far away from him as she could with one hand, using her other one to pushing him away as he tried to grab it. They were glaring at one another hotly, and he just knew that it was a bad fight in the making.

"What's going on?" Max asked Kidd curiously.

"Lucario kept Ash under the water not to drown him but to disperse his out of control aura, which is flaring up more the closer with get to the Tree of Beginning. He's worried that he's going to hurt someone and insists on going the rest of the way alone, but Misty's having none of that, and we're in a stalemate now," she explained quickly.

Max blinked. "Oh. Okay."

"That's enough from both of you!" Brock finally snapped, storming towards the two. He grabbed Ash's bag and said, "You are not going anywhere alone."

"What?" Ash stared at Brock with wide eyes. "I thought you'd agree with me!"

"Why would I do that?" the eldest boy honestly seemed confused about that.

"Because I could hurt someone! You always look out for everyone, especially the youngest ones, so you should be telling me to go away for May and Max at least. I'd know; I was the youngest for three years," Ash said quickly, folding his arms across his chest.

Brock couldn't deny that. He'd always seen his traveling companions as younger brothers and sisters, and like his own, he always felt compelled to help them. He shook his head and said, "That may be true, but what do you plan on doing? You hurt your leg, and I bet after that scuffle, it's killing you right now. There's no way you're walking to the Tree of Beginning, and you don't have a flying type big enough to get you there. Besides, what if you hurt yourself again?"

"I won't."

"Except you will!" Misty snapped at him, taking a step towards him with narrowed eyes. "You always do. Every time you go off on your own you get into some sort of trouble. Every time! Then

I have to—to swim through stormy, ice cold water to stop you from drowning, and the only reason I even got there in time was because Pikachu was holding you above water, and he's not here now, so what if something does happen?! Huh? You need us to come with you! Besides, we've come this far, to hell we're turning back!"

Silence fell across all of them, and Ash looked away from her. Brock aside, no one else knew what they were talking about, and even he only had part of the story. It seemed to be a strong enough one to get through to him though. He went back to the jeep and threw Ash's bag back in, nodding to Kidd.

"We should get a bit of rest," Kidd said to them all, her voice stern. She pointed up at the sky, where clouds were beginning to form again. "It may rain, so we'll all just stay inside, if that's okay with everyone."

They all agreed, piling back into the jeep. May and Max originally were going to separate Ash and Misty again, but a quick glare from the redhead made them change their minds. Misty wanted to be beside him to stop him from running off at night.

Piling into the car, they all pulled blankets around them, and surprisingly, they were all able to fall asleep.

-End Chapter Seven-

Sky

The Tree Of Beginning

"Pikapi."

Ash's eyes snapped open, though he didn't jerk or move from his spot in the backseat. He couldn't remember what he was dreaming about, but one thing was for sure, Pikachu was calling for him, and he doubted it was just in his sleep.

He looked around the jeep, seeing that everyone else was still slumbering peacefully. He looked over, smiling a bit when he saw Max and May cuddled up together, but they weren't the only ones. Misty was leaning on him heavily once again, and he found that he liked the warmth. He looked down at her curiously, his eyes shifting to the Maple siblings and back again. His friends were willing to follow him into some sort of danger, even when they didn't have to. Just the thought made him feel like he could do anything.

He carefully moved Misty, who ended up slumped against May's other side instead, he took his blanket off, spreading it across all three of them, and got out of the back seat.

His eyes fixated on the silhouette of the Tree of Beginning. He could feel the breeze running through his hair as he stared up at it and whispered, "Pikachu." He really wanted his friend back. At least he'd have some sort of normalcy again. Though Pikachu might tease him or agree with others when he was being completely stupid, he knew that his most loyal Pokemon was always that, loyal. Pikachu would always be on his side for the things that mattered, and he could help Ash understand things in a way that none of his human friends could. That might have been a bit pathetic in the eyes of some, but Ash didn't regret that his best friend was a different species. Though Ash didn't see it, Lucario was sitting behind some of the large crystals, watching him. The Pokemon heard his whisper and looked towards the formation in the distance. Lucario watched as the boy stood there for a few moments in complete silence, completely still, before turning and going back into the jeep. Lucario watched as he willingly pulled Misty back to him, wanting some sort of comfort that she seemed willing to give. The Pokemon sighed. His choice on whether to continue helping or not was already made.

That little boy, Max, was very persuasive.

...

They started traveling bright and early in the morning. Much to every one's surprise, Ash didn't want anything to eat. They were almost to the Tree of Beginning, and he wanted to get there as soon as he possibly could. So instead of worrying about a big meal, Brock opted to bring out his emergency, homemade breakfast bars.

May and Max laughed as they helped the little Bonsly eat his, but despite their happy sounds, Ash's face was set and serious. He was leaning against his door, the window opened, staring up at the rock formation that was looming over them now.

Brock looked back at his friend, worry appearing on his face as he watched Ash slowly squeeze his breakfast bar with his free hand. He looked at Misty and nodded to the boy's hand, and she quickly caught on.

"Ash," Misty spoke quietly, not wanting to bring out May and Max's happy moods. "You're going to need your strength later. Please eat that. Or at least don't crush it."

He blinked and looked at her as if he just realized that she was there. He looked down at his hand and loosened his grip, letting out a sigh, and he leaned back against the seat again. He didn't say anything, but he did nod his head and slowly started eating, which was a strange thing to see as it was.

The silence was broken as everyone let out startled cries as Kidd slammed on her breaks. They weren't thrown around like they were before; she didn't hit them quite that hard, but it was abrupt enough to startle everyone.

Ash looked out his opened window and saw that Lucario was staring up at a rocky ledge, not moving. He wanted to be annoyed, but he found that he couldn't. There was just something about the Pokemon that seemed off and sad. Not that it was visible; it was just a feeling. It registered in his mind that he was probably feeling a bit of Lucario's aura. However angry he was with the Pokemon, he still didn't like that feeling at all, so he opened his door, everyone else following suit.

"Lucario, what's wrong?" Ash asked him as they group approached.

If Lucario was startled that he asked the question, not anyone else, he didn't show it. He only glanced back at them briefly before looking up at the cliffs before them and said, "This is the place where I was trapped in the staff."

"Huh," Ash breathed out, not sure if it the sound was a question or not. He took a few steps forward, but was wary of getting too close to Lucario. He probably couldn't have gotten too close anyway, if Mama-Ursaring-Misty had anything to say about it.

Lucario dropped to his knees suddenly and asked, "Why did he do it? Why did he trap me? Why did he abandon everyone?"

Without warning, a light appeared in front of Lucario. That was the first time they noticed the crystal-like flower that was in front of him.

"A time flower," Ash whispered as the world around them turned into a blurred, foggy, sepia-toned image, like watching a virtual movie.

On the rock formation, there was a tall man dressed exactly like Ash had been for the festival. Sir Aaron's portraits depicted him accurately with very little discrepancies. There was an image of Lucario there as well.

They watched with baited breath as Sir Aaron turned, throwing the staff down in front of Lucario where it lodged into the ground. The jewel on top started glowing, the light capturing Lucario just like a pokeball did in their time.

As he looked up in the memory and saw Sir Aaron fly away on a Pidgeot, the only thing Ash could feel in him was guilt. It hit him so hard and strong that he almost wanted to cry, but held it in. People called him dense and stupid (he didn't let it get to him anymore), but he could see that he had been horribly wrong about what he said to Lucario. The Pokemon was telling the truth the entire time, and Ash, who always preached about his love for Pokemon and how he saw them as equals, refused to listen.

He managed to keep any tears under control and looked back to Lucario. The Pokemon was looking up at the memory that played around them, his eyes locked onto the staff that he had been imprisoned in for hundreds of years. It shook with the ground, and everyone was highly alarmed to see hundreds of Pokemon running at them.

"It's just a memory," Brock said quickly as the Pokemon reached them.

"May!" Max cried out, despite Brock's words, holding onto his sister tightly. She silently hugged him to her, not the least bit bothered that the Bonsly hid behind her legs too.

Misty grabbed Ash's arm with alarm, her wide eyes looking at all of the Pokemon that charged by them.

"It's just a memory," Misty repeated Brock's words, more to herself than anything. "It's just a— eek!" She moved behind Ash quickly when a Beedrill flew close by them.

Ash was going to crack a joke at her expense; no matter what he was feeling, it was too good an opportunity to pass up. That idea was cut short as Lucario let out an enraged yell. Though Ash couldn't see Lucario through the vision, but he could feel something strong.

"Get down!" he yelled, and everyone ducked just in time to avoid the aura sphere that flew at them.

"Is he insane?" Misty cried out as another one passed them.

Ash ignored her, straightening up again as he yelled out, "Lucario! It's just a vision from the past! It's not real! They're not real! Stop it!"

Lucario seemed to snap out of it, but not in time to stop his last attack. It flew at them with such precision and speed that they couldn't dodge out of the way in time.

To Ash, it felt like time slowed down. Instinctively, one hand reached out to protect the person physically closest to him (Misty, in this case, but it didn't matter to him who it was), and the other one reached out, as if his hand could take the full brunt of the attack. He couldn't let anyone else get hurt (because who knew what happened to Pikachu by this point of time), and even if that meant letting himself get hit, he'd do it. He braced himself for the pain of the attack, but it didn't come.

Just in front of Ash's hand, the aura sphere collided with an invisible barrier than became visible for just a second after the attack hit, glowing a pale blue. Ash felt the shock of the attack rush through his arm, and throwing him onto his rear. He shook his head wildly, trying to get the feeling back in it as he looked back up at Lucario, meeting the Pokemon's shocked gaze for only a moment before it ran away and the memory faded.

"Are you okay?" Misty asked with worry, though her face was angry. "I swear, you are actually trying to get yourself killed this time, aren't you?"

"What just happened?" Ash asked as he moved his arm around, standing back up.

"You blocked it," Brock said slowly. There was a pause as he let that thought sink in before he added, "You know, that may explain why you seem to survive stuff no one else does. Maybe you've been subconsciously protecting yourself with that all along."

"Well, that makes more sense than my theory that he's actually some weird, alien Pokemon," Max said with a nod, choosing to ignore the stares everyone sent at him.

Silence fell over the group, and May finally said, "That was scary."

"You know what I think?" Brock spoke up. "I think Lucario's been telling the truth this whole time. Sir Aaron wasn't a hero; he wasn't even around."

Ash didn't wait around to see what anyone else had to say on the subject. He ran in the direction

Lucario went, ignoring the sting from his leg (it healed up fairly well over night), only slowing down when he finally saw Lucario kneeling in front of a large cavern.

Lucario looked around at him, perhaps sensing his presence or maybe just hearing him, but as the Pokemon looked at Ash, he couldn't stop the guilt from eating through him. He felt tears well up in his eyes, and tilted his head down so that his hat hid his eyes, not wanting the proud Pokemon to see the tears.

"Lucario? I'm...I'm sorry about what I said to you. About Sir Aaron. About everything. You've been right about almost everything this whole time. About Sir Aaron. About me. But not Pikachu. I shouldn't have attacked you. You're right that I'm a coward, and that I don't deserve this power. I know I don't." He tried to wipe his tears away, but Ash knew that Lucario would have seen them. "I'm sorry."

The Pokemon observed him for a moment, but not just by sight. He reached out, feeling Ash's aura, but looking beyond just the surface. He never bothered before, because Ash felt too much like Sir Aaron. It hurt to feel. Underneath though, instead of comparing him to Sir Aaron, Lucario just tried to understand who Ash was. What really hit the Pokemon was how good of a heart Ash had. It made him feel guilty as well.

"Ash," he spoke up, choosing to ignore the boy's tears that he was obviously trying to hide. "Promise me that you will never abandon Pikachu or any of your friends."

Ash wiped the tears away, smiling as he nodded and said, "I won't. I swear."

Lucario nodded at him, and Ash could almost feel the tension leaving them. There was a silent agreement that there would be no more arguments or fighting; that they would just work together from now on.

The Pokemon was silent for a moment before saying, "You made an instinctive barrier. That is good for someone so untrained. Very good if it blocked my aura sphere. You prefer defense, whether you realize it or not, to protect those you care about." Lucario looked at him sternly. "Here, you will find it easier to use your aura because of how strongly it's concentrated. You could even make barriers between individual crystals and leave the area, and they would still function. That is going to be your biggest strength here."

"I'm not sure I understand," Ash admitted, surprised by the Pokemon's sudden tutoring.

"Do as I say. Close your eyes." He waited for Ash to do that as everyone else stood away from them, watching silently. "Concentrate, feel, listen. It's hard to put into words, but you'll know you're doing it right, even in a split second's notice. You'll feel the power in you, in the world around you, and in the people and Pokemon. When you feel danger, imagine a wall, a barrier placed between you and the danger and will it into existence."

Ash nodded his head slowly. He wasn't always the quickest student, but this, at least the basics, seemed almost natural to him. Then again, aura was a part of him, wasn't it? It was something that he was born with, something that had always been there, small little bursts of power coming to help him even if he didn't realize it. That was something to think about. This wasn't some strange power that came out of nowhere. It had always been inside of him. It occurred to Ash that maybe learning aura wasn't as life-altering as he had been thinking all along, since it was something that he had inside of him since the beginning.

The revelation made him feel a little bit lighter, and unless he was just going crazy, it was almost like a haze was starting to lift and he could actually feel the world around him a little clearer.

That was how he felt the danger coming.

Ash's eyes snapped open, but before he could move, Lucario tackled him out of the way, his own senses much sharper than Ash's developing ones. The ground that they were on exploded outwards with dirt and rock as a massive creature launched itself out of the ground. For such a huge creature, it made good distance, landing behind Kidd's jeep.

"Regirock," it said, followed by a beeping sound.

"Move!" Kidd cried out as the Pokemon lifted up the vehicle. They ran just in time to avoid having the jeep thrown at them. "It's a Regirock!"

"Ya think?" Misty snapped as she stumbled back, but managed to keep her footing. She winced as a powerful hyper beam just missed them, crashing into the rock's behind them.

Ignoring the redhead, Kidd looked around wildly before yelling, "This way!" She motioned for them to follow her into the crevice in the mountain.

The Regirock shot another hyper beam at them, but Lucario countered it with his aura sphere. Lucario looked around at Ash, who didn't follow the others but seemed to be waiting for him. There was no time to think on this behaviour though. "Follow me."

"Right," Ash said, following the Pokemon as he ran into the same place as Kidd. Lucario rushed past all of them, but instead of questioning it, they all followed Ash's lead, chasing after the Pokemon.

"In here," Lucario said, motioning to an opening in the wall. It was incredibly dark, but they all trusted that he would lead them to safety.

"I think I have some flashlights," Brock spoke up.

"Our bags are all in the car," May said dryly. She knew Brock came prepared and probably had bandaids and some type of disinfectant in his pockets, but she doubted he had flashlights on him.

"Oh, right," he said sheepishly.

"Hey, Ash, aren't these the crystals that reacted to you?" Misty asked from where she slowly walked by the wall.

The boy in question moved back through the crowd, bumping into Max as he did, before he reached Misty's side. He strained through the darkness to see what she was looking at, but he couldn't see a thing.

An idea came to him. Lucario wanted him to feel the world around him, so that's what he'd do. Even with his eyes opened, the empty cave itself almost felt alive to him, but he couldn't really pinpoint anything. With his eyes closed though, it was almost like he could see tiny, glowing dots in front of him. Ash reached forward, his fingers brushing against the rough walls of the cave before colliding with something smooth, and his eyes opened. Almost immediately, the crystal began to glow with a pale light, and he felt a wave of pride rush through him.

"We can use these," Lucario said as he came close to the wall, the sound of approval audible in his voice. He touched one of the crystals, which lit up just like the one under Ash's hand, but then he closed his eyes and a faint aura appeared around his paw. Ash watched with interest as the light seemed to seep into the crystal, and then, one by one, the crystals in the cave started to glow, allowing them to see where they were going a bit more. That must have been what he meant by

using the environment. These crystals acted like conductors or something like that.

"That's amazing," Max said in awe.

"Stay close," Lucario warned them. "Come on."

"Do you know why that Regirock attacked us?" Ash asked Lucario as they followed behind him.

"Can you feel his intent?"

"What? No, why would I?" Ash asked curiously.

"Aura is what you feel over what you see. One day, you might even be able to feel emotion and intent off of other trainers." Lucario let that thought sink in before answering the question. "It was just giving us a warning."

"Why would it do that?" Kidd asked skeptically, pulling a small flashlight from her bag that she had around her waist. It gave them a little more vision in the dark tunnel.

"It must be on the lookout for intruders to protect the Tree of Beginning," Lucario answer.

Their footsteps seemed to echo off of the walls of the cave as it became more and more narrow, forcing them to walk in single file after a little while.

"I don't like it here, May," Max whispered to her, not wanting to talk too loudly.

"It'll be okay," she assured her younger brother.

"There's an exit just ahead," Lucario said suddenly.

"That's good," Misty said, letting out a hiss a moment later.

"Are you okay?" Ash asked her, looking over his shoulder as he walked.

"Yeah, just got a scratch from one of the crystals," she said with a shake of her head. "They're getting bigger here."

"Yeah, and the tunnel is getting smaller," Brock said warily. "Everyone watch where they're going."

They all heeded his warning, moving as carefully as they could. Kidd, who was at the front of the group, stopped and winced when she went around the corner, and her eyes were assaulted by the brightness of the cave's exit. "Looks like we're out." She took a few steps forward, and gasped as she finally got out of the cave. "You guys need to check this out."

The rest of the group rushed to get out, not complaining about any little cuts or scrapes that they got. They were all amazed at what they found. There were tall cliffs made of stone with lush grass and trees on them, and a massive, crystal clear lake with waterfalls pouring in everywhere. The entire ecosystem was in a cave that looked like it was made from rough, unrefined crystal, while, at the top of the cavern, there was a huge, flower-like crystal glowing brightly, casting a pale green-blue glow over the entire place.

"Look at the Pokemon," Max said as he moved closer to the cliff's edge, kneeling down onto the ground. "Those are Lileep and Cradily. And look there's some Armaldo!"

"Those are Omanyte and Omastar," Brock pointed out. "That's amazing. They're supposed to be extinct, aside from the few that the scientific community has managed to create from fossils."

"Look at all the Altaria up there," May added as she pointed above them, cradling Bonsly with her other arm. "And are those Ledyba and Ledian?"

"Even here," Misty said with a shiver, eyeing the flying bug Pokemon warily, especially a Yanma that flew by.

"I think we're right under the Tree of Beginning," Kidd spoke up as she put on her specialized, computer glasses, looking above them at the smooth crystals providing the light.

Ash moved quickly, taking a step towards Lucario as he asked, "Is Pikachu there?"

"Right above us," Lucario confirmed.

"Yes!" he cried out, pumping his fist excitedly. All of his friends could only smile at his enthusiasm. It was something that they were all starting to miss about him.

"Reach out with your heart; you should be able to feel him too," Lucario told him.

Ash remembered the feeling that he had earlier, and eagerly listened to Lucario, closing his eyes and trying to feel out to Pikachu, as odd as it sounded. He believed Lucario that his best friend was up there, but he just wanted some proof for himself. It took a moment, but then he felt something. It was a warmth from somewhere high above them, a bit faint from distance. He just knew who it was though; he could feel it. A smile appeared on his face as his eyes snapped open again. An excited laugh left his lips as he darted past everyone, running up the grassy hill that ran along the sides of the cavern.

"Ash, do you even know where you're going?" May called out to him.

"He's above us, so we keep going up," he said enthusiastically. He paused for a moment, looking at Lucario. "That's right, right?"

"That's the idea," the Pokemon confirmed with a nod.

"Let's go!" Ash cried out, running again.

"And he's back," Misty said with a small smirk as she shook her head. Wasting no time, Misty started running after their excited friend.

"Hey, wait for us!" Max cried out as he ran after Misty, May following him closely. None of them even noticed that Brock and Kidd took a few moments to catch up, and they didn't notice the small, flying robots that took off throughout the caverns.

Nothing could get in Ash's way now. Not any worries about powers or injuries or his feelings for Misty or anything like that. He was almost to Pikachu again, and that's what mattered. He ran up the steep slope of the tunnel that they were in, only Lucario keeping up with him. He knew that the others would be fine without him though. He didn't care about Kidd's interest in Mew; he just wanted to find Pikachu.

Finally, he caught sight of another opening and rushed out onto another grassy ledge. A gasp of awe escaped his lips as Lucario came up on one side of him. Misty managed to catch up (the many bruises he got over the years served as reminders that she was just as fast as he was, maybe even more), though the others were behind in the cave, panting heavily as she leaned against him a bit.

He reached out an arm to keep her steady and said, "Look, Mist."

Misty looked up and gasped just as he had. They could see everything for miles around, even Cameron Castle, looking like a tiny speck in the distance. The air was clear and a little cold, and

they were much higher up than she expected. No wonder she was out of breath.

Ash let go of her after a moment, taking a few steps back and turning to look up the layers of cliffs that gave the rock formation its unique shape. He cupped his mouth with his hands to project his voice more, and yelled, "Pikachu! Are you there, buddy?" He waited for a moment before taking off up the slopes.

"This boy is going to be the death of me," Misty said as she and Lucario followed him.

"You can wait for the others," the Pokemon assured her. "I won't let anything happen to him. He won't be alone."

Misty smiled a bit and said, "Someone told me something like that once. I'll tell you what I told her. Ash is never alone, because he's got me." She was aware of Lucario's curious look as she continued running after the boy in question.

"Pikachu!" He cried out. "If you can hear me, give me a sign! Pikachu!"

There was silence again, and Ash was about to start running once more, but Misty grabbed his hood to stop him. He rounded around on her to demand what she wanted, but she held up a finger and pointed at the sky. They both waited in silence, and then they heard it.

"Pikapi!" It was faint, and it was obvious that the creature making the sound was much higher up, but all Ash could do was smile.

"It's Pikachu!" he said with a laugh, grabbing Misty by the waist and practically swinging her around in a wild hug.

Misty's face turned red, and she stumbled a little when he abruptly let go of her and kept running. She shook her head, smiling a bit, and continued to chase after him. She honestly forgot how fast he could be when he wanted to, and how good of a climber that he was. She remembered catching up to him on the best of days though, and a wave of competitiveness hit her.

She managed to catch up to Ash and said, "Race you."

"You're on!" he cried out as they both ran as quickly as they could. After only a few steps, his smile vanished, and he suddenly felt alarmed. Something was wrong. Out of the corner of his eye, Ash saw something move, but he wasn't sure what it was. All he knew was that it was trouble. "Misty, wait!"

"No way, Ash Ketchum, I'm not-" Misty cut herself off as she came to an abrupt stop, her eyes going wide as she took a few steps back.

There, looming before her, looking like it was made out of carved ice, was Regice.

Sky

To Lose And To Find

"Misty! Move!" Ash yelled out to her the second his eyes landed on the Pokemon.

Adrenaline rushed through her as Regice shot an ice beam at her. Misty didn't scream, but she let out a gasp as she managed to jump out of the way at the last minute, falling into some rocks and painfully knocking the air out of her. She quickly got back up, lost in a complete daze as she realized the ice golem was coming at her again.

On instinct, her hand went into her bag, picking a pokeball from it and throwing it without checking on who it was. The blue light flashed brightly as her Pokemon was released, and a loud roar made relief rush through her. It was exactly who she was hoping she'd get.

"Gyarados!" Misty yelled. "Flamethrower!"

Though Gyarados was perched precariously on the ledge that was too small for him with no water for the sea serpent to take advantage of, he let out a roar as powerful flames streaked from his mouth, colliding with the powerful ice beam midair, steam exploding in all directions.

"Misty!" Ash ran through the steam, not using his eyes to find her, but rather his aura. "Are you okay?"

"Not now!" she said, calling Gyarados back. "We need to run!" She grabbed his arm and they started barreling down the steep slopes, Lucario throwing aura spheres back behind them wildly.

Ice flashed past them, and Ash let out a yelp as the ground in front of them turned into pure ice. Unable to stop because of their momentum, the two of them ended up falling down and sliding over the edge of the cliff.

Misty let out a shriek as they plummeted over the edge. Ash managed to grab a thick root sticking out of the side of the cliff, his other hand holding onto Misty's wrist as tightly as he could. Misty winced as pain jolted through her arm from the sudden stop, grabbing onto his wrist so that her hand wouldn't slip through his.

Ash looked up, wincing when he saw an explosion, no doubt Lucario fighting Regice. He looked around wildly, his heart beating almost painfully as he looked for anything that could save at least her. Getting Misty to safety was all that mattered to him at that moment. Trying to calm himself down, he closed his eyes tightly.

He could see the glowing outlines of the Tree of Beginning, the aura within it too powerful for him not to see. With his eyes closed, he could clearly see a ledge a little beneath them.

Ash's eyes snapped open and he said, "Misty, grab onto the rock wall. There's a ledge below you. I can lower you down!"

Misty looked down and then nodded her head, maneuvering herself closer to the wall and grabbing on with her other hand. "Let go!"

It was such a hard thing to do, because it almost sounded like he was going to let her just drop to save himself. Reminding himself that he was actually saving her, he let go of her hand.

Misty grunted as she fell, her feet colliding with the thin ledge harshly. She teetered a bit before grabbing onto the cliff tightly, moving as quickly as she could.

Able to use both of his hands again, Ash grabbed onto the root and pulled himself up with ease, climbing back onto the ledge. The ice was gone, melted from the fighting. He looked around wildly for Lucario, seeing him in a power struggle with Regice.

Biting his lip, Ash watched Lucario throw another aura sphere, his thoughts slowly gathering. If feeling the energy and pushing it out in front of him to protect his friends could create a shield, then just maybe he could do something else.

Focusing, Ash pictured the glow he could see and feel forming into a ball, his always wild imagination easily making the image. He opened his eyes again, a bit startled to see that there was actually a glowing sphere hovering between his hands. He stared at it for only a moment before his eyes locked on Regice, and he pushed.

The sphere moved much more quickly than he expected, causing him to stumble forward. It flew past Lucario, slamming into Regice's face. The ice golem hadn't been expecting it and ended up falling over.

Surprise and a bit of pride rushed from Lucario over to him. The jackal jumped over to him and said, "He won't stay down for long. We need to go." He didn't question where Misty was, able to feel her presence farther down.

Ash nodded his head, and they started running down again. Misty waited down the hill from them, worry visible on her face, but she didn't bother asking if he was okay, choosing to run with him then. Questions would come later.

They ran down the steep slopes that they somehow managed to scale earlier (neither one of them could remember the hills actually being this steep), skidding and sliding on some of the loose rocks. As the path led to a grass landing at the entrance of the cave that they were in before, Ash saw Brock, Max, May (still cradling Bonsly), and Kidd coming out.

"Guys, go back!" he yelled, and everyone just looked up at them, but didn't move. He wondered if they really needed him to run past them first before they got the idea to get the heck out of the area. He felt more than a little annoyed that they didn't run.

"What's the matter?" May asked him as he and Misty came to a stop at the bottom of the steep slope, both panting from their fast run down the hill. Lucario flipped down in front of them, coming to a stop beside Max.

"Regice!" Ash spluttered out while waving his arms up the hill. There was no time for anyone to reply to that, as a beam of light struck just a few feet from where he was standing, creating large ice crystals on the ground.

"Regice!" the Pokemon cried out as it hovered down the slope that they just ran down moments before, another ball of ice appearing in front of it.

Lucario rushed in front of them, throwing an aura sphere up at the ice Pokemon. The two attacks collided, creating a barrier of smoke in front of Regice.

"Let's find a different path," Lucario said, quickly rushing back towards the side of the cliff. Everyone followed the Pokemon who ignored the cavern that they just came from, going over to a smaller one instead. "Everyone in here."

The last one to run inside was Kidd, who let out a surprised sound as ice crystals formed behind her, completely blocking the exit. There was no way that they would be able to get out that way

again.

Max came to a stop as he ran onto a ledge in a massive cave. His eyes went wide with awe as he looking at the huge, glowing crystals. If they weren't in danger, it'd be easy to stand there and just admire the beauty.

The peace was broken by a rather feminine scream. That was followed by a different voice yelling, "Somebody help!"

Misty was the one who spotted them first, her brow furrowing with disbelief as she said, "Seriously? I—no, I'm not surprised."

Team Rocket fell off of a ledge above them, crashing directly in front of the group.

"It's...Team Rocket," Ash said slowly, as if slightly surprised to see them there, but more like he expected it than anything else. He stared at them for a moment, before Jessie glanced up and looked around. She suddenly launched forward, on her knees and grabbed Ash's hands, causing the boy to let out a yelp of surprise and try to take a step back. At the same time, James seem to cower at Misty's feet, since she was the closest one to him.

"You know we're desperate if we're coming to you," Jessie spoke, sounding slightly hysterical.

"Those brutes up there keep trying to blast us!" James squeaked out, and they all figured that he was the one who screamed earlier. He pointed up at the ledge that they fell from, and everyone followed their gaze.

"Seriously?" Brock let out a groan when he saw Regirock and Registeel appear out of the tunnel. In reply, Registeel blasted a powerful hyper beam at them, just barely missing them.

"This way!" Lucario called out, jumping onto one of the large, glowing crystals that acted almost like bridges through the cavern.

Everyone followed, though Misty hesitated for a second, looking at the huge drop. Ash looked back at her, grabbed her hand, and said, "Come on. I never let you fall before."

She knew he meant that literally, but it was still sweet. She gripped his hand tightly and let him pull her along as Lucario fought off the two Legendary Pokemon. Misty winced as an explosion occurred behind them, but with Ash in front of her and Kidd behind her, she didn't feel nearly as nervous.

Luckily for them, that tunnel was much bigger than the one they ran through earlier, so there was no worry about scratching their arms on the sharp crystals protruding from the walls, ceiling, and floor, though they did have to watch their steps as best they could while running.

Finally they saw light ahead. Jessie was the first one to reach the entrance with James not far behind her, but when she did, she let out a startled scream and came to a stop, James just barely stopping in time.

Max wasn't nearly as quick on the draw, slamming into James and knocking him forward a bit.

May was about to call out her brother's name when he managed to catch his footing again. Her sapphire eyes took in the large, stone bridge that they were now on, the cool wind blowing roughly, making it a little unnerving to walk on, since if they fell, there was no way anyone could survive.

"We have to keep going," Kidd said to them as she looked down into the cave.

Team Rocket, being the first in line, quickly started running to the cave across the bridge.

Misty stared at the stone structure and said, "Can I never have normal visits with you, or do we always have to get into trouble?"

"Yeah, I'm starting to wonder that too," Ash admitted as they carefully but quickly walked towards the other cave, keeping their arms out for balance. Once they reached the other side, everyone ran the last few feet. It was a good choice if the explosion behind them said anything. Ash didn't look back, but from the loud crashes, he assumed that they couldn't go back in that direction.

"Don't leave me behind!" James called out in front of them as Jessie ran ahead through the dimly lit cave. He was stumbling a bit, exhausted from running.

"Does he always whine that much?" Kidd asked them.

"Yes," everyone answered together. The two members of Team Rocket ran ahead of them and out of sight, but they didn't get far, as Jessie's surprised scream rang throughout the tunnel. Though they were the bad guys, they still couldn't just leave them if they were in trouble; not in a situation like that.

"Go, Cacnea!" They heard James call out. "Cacnea! Use pin missile!"

Ash came around the corner and came to a complete stop, not quite sure what he was looking at. There was a massive, glowing orange blob in the shape of a Cradily. Its liquid-like body was wrapped around Jessie, slowly pulling more of her body into it.

"Why didn't it work?" James cried out in confusion when Cacnea's attack went completely through the blob.

"What is that?" Max asked, voicing the question that they all wanted to know.

"It thinks I'm a snack!" Jessie cried out in panic, struggling as the blob morphed around her, losing its form as it completely swallowed her. They watched in horror as it sank into the ground, disappearing.

"Oh my god," May whispered, holding Bonsly close to her with one hand and dragging Max closer to her side with the other. "It just—it just...Brock, did it just..."

"I don't know," Brock answered in a shaky voice.

Ash's attention went to the crystals immediately around where Jessie was swallowed up. All of them started glowing a fierce, angry orange when the blob vanished into the ground. His eyes narrowed at them, and he was about to voice a question, but cut himself off as another blob shot down the cave.

This one, in the shape of an Omanyte, collided with James, who let out a squeal. The man struggled for a moment, managing to get his second pokeball from his belt in the blob, and called out, "Chimecho, save yourself!"

Chimecho and Cacnea both ran (or floated, in Chimecho's case) to where the blob vanished in the ground with their trainer, not quite sure what to do.

"Chime?"

"Cacnea."

"They're gone," Max whispered.

Ash looked towards the crystals as they changed back to normal. He didn't say anything, but from the way Lucario looked at them too, he knew that it meant something. It had to.

"What are those things?" May asked fearfully.

"I've never seen anything like them before," Lucario admitted. No one got the chance to reply to that though, as a loud bang from behind them signaled the arrival of a new problem.

"Regirock and Registeel again?" Misty snapped, taking a step back. "Why can't they all just leave us alone?"

"No time! Just run!" Brock called out, leading the group away from the enraged Pokemon as Lucario held them off.

They ran through the twisting tunnel away from the Pokemon that were stalking them, but Brock skidded to a stop as a glowing orange blob, twisting into the shape of an Aerodactyl, flew towards them.

Lucario jumped in front of them, hitting it with an aura sphere. Unlike Cacnea's attack, this one actually broke the blob up. "We need to keep moving!"

"Right," Ash muttered, running in front of everyone else. He didn't want anyone else to lead the way, just in case they ran into another one of those things going around the corner. He was not going to let any of his friends get hurt. He could hear Kidd talking behind them, no doubt through her headset to whoever was on the other end, but he didn't really care about the conversation. It may have been a horrible thought, but he also wasn't going to focus on keeping Kidd safe, since, if he had to choose someone to leave behind, it'd be her over his friends.

"It thinks we're some kind of disease?" she said loudly as they continued running, catching everyone's attention.

"Speak for yourself," Max mumbled.

"What do we do?" May asked the young woman.

"Bonsly bons!"

Kidd shook her head and said, "We have to find a way out of this tunnel." They kept running, and she said, "This would be a great time to find an exit, Banks." Her moment of distraction cost her, as another blob flew out of seemingly nowhere.

"Kidd!" Brock cried out, about to run back, but Ash and Misty grabbed his arms to stop him. Lucario vaulted over May and Max, landing in front of Kidd just in time to stop the blob from swallowing her whole.

Instead, he was trapped inside.

"Lucario!" Ash cried out in horror. Forget finding Pikachu; there was no way that any of them were going to get away from the Tree of Beginning without Lucario. He was relieved, but incredibly confused when the blob faded to the ground, leaving Lucario behind without a scratch.

"I guess Pokemon aren't considered a disease," Kidd said thoughtfully.

"That's it?" Misty snapped at her, her nerves getting the best of her. "He basically just sacrificed himself for you, and you're just like 'wow, fancy that'? What if he was gone? We'd all die in here!"

"Calm down," Ash said, grabbing her shoulders and shaking them. It was a dangerous thing to do when Misty got in certain moods, like playing hot potato with a stick of lit dynamite, but they couldn't be arguing right now. Even he knew that.

Misty looked like she was about to yell at him, but her sea green eyes went wide with horror, and Ash looked around, back down the tunnel. He let out a groan when he saw Regirock again.

"Keep running!" Brock yelled.

Ash looked around at May and Max. They were both horrified, frightened, and no doubt tired from all this running. They couldn't keep this up. As they left the tunnel, coming out in a large cavern with the entrances to several other large tunnels, he came to a decision.

They all came to a stop to choose which tunnel to come down, but he held up a hand and said, "I'll lead them away from you." He quickly looked at Kidd before anyone could argue and said, "Try to find a way out, and we'll meet up later."

She looked unsure for a moment, her eyes studying him from behind her computer-glasses, but then nodded her head and said, "You got it!"

"Ash," May mumbled, staring at him with wide, frightened eyes.

"I'll be okay; you guys go," he insisted, looking from her, to Max, to Brock, and finally at Misty.

The redhead gave him a fierce look, taking a few steps toward him, and said, "I'm going with you."

"No," Ash said to her.

Misty's eyes narrowed, and she took a step towards him. "I'm going—"

"With them!" Ash snapped, his serious, fierce tone instantly causing her to take a step back. He took a deep breath and said, "Go with them. I know you can take care of yourself, but you need to protect them."

She stared at him for a moment before nodding her head slowly. She went by the others, staring back at Ash for a moment before saying, "Let's run!" Her voice was shaky, but luckily for her, Kidd ushered everyone down a random tunnel.

Ash blinked with surprise when Lucario came to his side and asked, "You're staying?"

Lucario chuckled and said, "I won't leave until you find Pikachu. You would stay with me until I found Sir Aaron, wouldn't you?"

Ash smiled at him and nodded his head, but the smile disappeared as quickly as it appeared. He took two pokeballs off his belt, enlarging them and throwing up high into the air. The beams of light revealed Corphish and Grovyle. He wasn't a moment too soon, as Regirock and Registeel came into the cavern.

"Grovyle, use bullet seed! Corphish, bubblebeam!" Ash ordered them.

The two attacks slammed into the two Legendary Pokemon, Regirock taking a lot more damage

than Registeel. The two were thrown back into the wall of the cavern, tossing dust up into the air.

"Good job, guys! Come on!" Ash called out, turning and running towards another tunnel, glancing back at his Pokemon quickly, sighing in relief as he saw Grovyle pick up Corphish as they ran.

"Lead the way, Lucario," Ash told them Pokemon as they ran up a ledge by one of the tunnels. Once everyone ran by him, he stopped to look back into the cavern, seeing that Registeel was slowly walking towards them, Regirock limping behind it. "Hey! Can't catch us!" He turned on his heel and ran after everyone else.

Lucario looked back at him and shook his head. "You must be crazy."

"You bet," he agreed with a grin.

...

May's legs were burning as they ran out of a yet another tunnel into another large cavern with many more tunnels in it. She set Bonsly on the ground and shook her arms out, wincing a little. She didn't understand how someone could constantly carry a Pokemon like that around and had to hand it to Misty for doing it with Togepi and later Azurill (at least, part of the time).

There was no one following them, and that was a huge relief.

"Are you guys okay?" Brock asked his younger friends, always the older brother.

"I don't know if I can keep running," Max admitted, sounding exhausted. "Why do things like this keep happening to us? Like with Jirachi and that fake Groudon, and then the Deoxys and Rayquaza."

"This type of trouble follows Ash around," Brock admitted with a sigh. "He should probably come with a disclaimer about that. Still, I don't think we can stop here either."

"Brock's right," Misty agreed as she rubbed her sore knees. "Ash gave us the chance to run; we need to keep going."

"But where do we go?" May asked, motioning around the cavern while Max kept moving over the grass and rock platforms before them. "There's caves everywhere, and we can't just keep picking at random and hope we don't get even more lost."

"Any idea, Kidd?" Brock turned his attention towards the young woman with them.

"Well—" She started to speak, but cut herself off as her eyes went wide, and she took a step back. "Look out!"

May looked around just in time to see a Kabuto-shaped blob crash into Max. She screamed, running towards her younger brother as the orange blob wrapped itself around the boy. She grabbed a hold of him as tightly as she could.

Max struggled and turned around, reaching out towards his sister as he was drawn farther into the blob. Fear and panic rushed through him as May took his hands and tried to pull him out.

Brock and Misty ran towards them to help, but he was attacked by another orange blob. May didn't even flinch for the older boy though, keeping all of her attention on her sobbing younger brother. As annoying as he was, she couldn't let him get hurt. Not like this.

Kidd was about to run to them to help, but another blob rushed at her, and she had to change directions.

Brock moved his arms inside of the blob, wincing at the sting he started feeling on his skin. Everything was starting to prickle and go numb, but it hurt too. These things wouldn't hurt their Pokemon though. They'd be safe. He managed to snatch two of his pokeballs and forced his hands out of the orange material surrounding him. "Run for it, guys!"

Fortress and Mudkip appeared, both incredibly confused as they watched their trainer slowly being pulled into the glowing blob. Misty shot forward and grabbed his arm, trying to pull him out.

"Let go, Mist! Run! It's okay!"

"No it's not!" she said, pulling as hard as he could. Both of their hands were slick with sweat, and she ended up falling back away from him, watching in horror as he vanished.

"Fortress!"

"Mudkip!"

Max's hands slipped away from May's, and both of the blobs vanished into the floor. The young girl fell to her knees, staring at the ground where her brother just vanished. Tears welled up in her eyes, and she tried to hide her sobs from the Pokemon, not wanting to alarm them, but she couldn't stop herself.

They came to get Pikachu, but now both her brother and Brock were gone, and so was Team Rocket. Maybe for good.

May didn't get a chance to keep going with that train of thought as she was attacked. She screamed in surprise and struggled against it, but she knew that she wasn't going to get away.

"May!" Misty shrieked, pulled out of her own shocked stupor.

"No!" May yelled at her as she was about to run. She managed to fish three pokeballs out from her pouch, throwing them into the air, "Come out, everyone! Misty! Go after Ash! Run! Please!"

Munchlax, Combusken, and Squirtle appeared, all confused at first. They quickly realized that something was wrong though, and ran towards their trainer. There was nothing they could do though. May was gone.

Misty took a few steps back, not sure what to do with herself. In her mind, she had just let three of her friends vanish, possibly die. How was it fair for her to walk away?

Her mind quickly flashed to Ash, and horror rushed through her. She had to find him before this happened to him too. Making up her mind, Misty started running towards the exit, dodging the blob that threw itself at her. She got to where Kidd was, the young woman staring at the scene in horror.

"Run!" Misty yelled at her.

Kidd nodded her head slowly, but she was a bit stunned. She never intended for anyone to get hurt, but Mew vanished with Pikachu when her Weavile attacked them. If she would have thought about something other than her own fame, her own records and prizes, this never would have happened.

There was no time to think of that though, as more of the orange, glowing blobs appeared. There was no time to think of the children she failed; she needed to run.

Misty and Kidd started running towards the exit, but they were surprised by a blob rushing at them from that direction. Kidd was faster than Misty, who was a few feet behind her, so where Misty managed to stop in time, Kidd ended up rushing into it.

Kidd struggled, reaching to her bag at her side and throwing her pokeballs into the air. The two Weavile appeared, watching in horror as she vanished. "I'm sorry. I guess this is goodbye."

By that point of time, Misty had already made her way out of the tunnel. She knew that it was almost heartless to leave Kidd, but if she had stayed still, she would've been a goner too.

She had to find Ash.

...

Something was wrong. Ash just knew that something was wrong. The feeling was pulsing through him with every step that he took. Lucario and his Pokemon were fine, and he just knew that Pikachu was okay too, but that still left Misty, May, Brock, and Max.

He had the sinking feeling that they couldn't run fast enough, but he refused to believe that. Not yet.

Out of nowhere, a loud sound echoed through the tunnels, causing him and his Pokemon to come to a complete stop. "Pikapi!"

"Pikachu," he whispered, his head snapping down a corridor different from the one he was about to run down. He just knew Pikachu was down that way; he could feel it with every fibre of his being.

Lucario rushed back down the tunnel and yelled, "Wait! Ash!" The boy didn't listen though, causing Lucario to sigh before he ran after him.

Ash ran up the tunnel, the sound of his loud footsteps being drowned out by his pounding heart. He could see light up ahead and just knew that if he could get there, he'd be so close to finding his friend again. He couldn't stop.

But stop he did. The whistling of the strong wind hit his ears after the blinding light from the outdoors hit his eyes. He skidded to a stop, staring down at a massive drop, bridges and ledges made from the crystals all around him. Ash braced himself as the wind hit him, almost blowing off his hat and blowing him away too.

"Pikapi!"

Ash's head snapped around, and the relief he felt hit him so hard that he almost fell to his knees. On the other side of the canyon, safely in the mouth of one of the caves, was Pikachu.

Pikachu seemed to have spotted him too. The yellow Pokemon waved his arms around excitedly and called out, "Pika!"

Ash watched as he jumped out onto the crystal bridges and couldn't help but laugh. He was going to wait where he was; he knew that his Pokemon was a lot safer on the crystal ledges than he'd be, but the wind picked up again. Instantly, worry and horror hit him. If it could knock him over, Pikachu didn't stand a chance.

Throwing caution to wind and ignoring the cries of Grovyle and Corphish, Ash dashed out onto the natural bridges.

There were times when bad things were happening that he seemed to lose all worry about himself. He wasn't afraid of falling or of dying, but he was afraid of Pikachu being picked up by the wind and thrown down the canyon to his death.

That didn't stop him from yelling with surprise when his feet were thrown out from under him, and he flew backwards. Pikachu cried out in alarm, bracing himself with the grooves in the crystals. Luckily, Ash crashed into another bridge, managing to find his footing on the uneven edges.

He looked back up at Pikachu again. There was no way his friend could move without being tossed into the air. Determination filled every inch of his body, and Ash yanked himself up onto his feet, running towards his friend again. Despite the blowing wind and the slightly slippery surfaces, Ash ran and jumped from ledge to ledge, determined to make it to Pikachu.

The wind eased up for a moment, and Pikachu took that chance to let go and start running, jumping across the crisscrossing crystals to try and reach his trainer before the wind became too strong again.

Lucario gritted his teeth as he finally caught up, standing tensely with Grovyle and Corphish as they all watched Ash and Pikachu run, his eyes taking in every single misstep either of them took.

Ash winced as his foot slipped. He let out a yelp that seemed to echo more than it should have as he fell to his stomach, managing to find grooves to use as finger holds.

Ash turned his attention back to Pikachu, and his eyes widened in horror when the Pokemon was picked up and thrown into the air. He pulled himself to his feet and started running as fast as he could to intercept his Pokemon. "Hang on, Pikachu!"

He jumped, managing to grab his Pokemon in his arms. Despite himself, Ash couldn't help but laugh, and he held Pikachu close, and the little Pokemon snuggled into him more. That all happened in a split second before he realized that his feet never did connect with solid ground after his jump.

The strong winds threw him and Pikachu high into the air, and then they plummeted down towards the earth.

Sky

In Life And Death

Ash Ketchum, at only the age of thirteen (almost fourteen), was positive that he was going to die. There were far too many times in his life (for someone his age), when he got this feeling before, but something always saved him. As he held Pikachu close to him, both of them falling in what felt like extreme slow-motion, he was sure that this was it. None of the crystals were close enough to grab, and he was sure that his developing aura powers would be useless in a massive free-fall.

He heard a scream that definitely didn't belong to him. He may have been forced to dress up like a girl before, but he was never able to get his voice that high. Ash didn't get long to think of this, because the next thing he knew, the falling completely stopped.

Slowly, and with confusion, his eyes blinked open and panic rushed through him as he stared down at nothing. He was literally suspended high up in the air. Looking around wildly, Ash tried to see what was going on, his eyes finally falling on the last thing that he ever expected: A yellow duck with glowing, blue eyes.

Without warning, he was suddenly flung towards the ledge, landing on one below where Lucairo and his two other Pokemon were. He hit the rock roughly, landing on his feet, but his legs couldn't hold him up, and he ended up on his knees on the rocky floor, Pikachu still held securely in his arms, equally just as stunned as him. His brown eyes looked up at the young woman before him, and as he held Pikachu close, he tried to say thank you, but his mind was still discombobulated and confused.

"Breathe," Misty ordered him as she knelt down in front of him, putting her hands on his shoulders. "Just breathe."

He closed his eyes and did as she said. His racing heart started to calm down, and he managed to find his voice. "Thanks."

"Pikapi!" Pikachu snapped out of his shock too, realizing where he was. The yellow pokemon shook with excitement as he wiggled out of Ash's arms, climbing up onto Ash's back and nuzzling his furry cheek against the side of Ash's face. "Chaaa."

"Pikachu," he said, smiling broadly as he nuzzled back.

There was a soft thump, and he looked up as Lucario landed beside him. The pokemon didn't look at him though, instead turning to look back at the crystals he just jumped down. A second later, Grovyle carrying Corphish followed.

Suddenly, the identity of his rescuer hit him, and he looked up with surprise. "Psyduck?"

"Duck?" it replied, tilting his head with confusion.

"Thanks," Ash told him, a small laugh escaping his lips. Psyduck was probably one of the last things he'd expect to save him. No doubt it was from his trainer's orders, but that wasn't the point. He looked around at Misty and was about to say something, but let out a small yelp when she slapped him across the face.

"You idiot!" she screeched at him, bringing up her hands and grabbing the front of his shirt while he was rubbing his sore cheek, shaking him wildly. "You complete moron! What were you thinking?!"

"But Pikachu and I are back together now," he managed to get out, trying to calm her down.

For a brief moment, as she glanced at Pikachu, her features softened, but the second she looked back to Ash, she tightened her grip on his shirt again, anger resorting itself on her face. He could see something else though, and only then did it hit him that she was supposed to be with everyone else. "Mist...you shouldn't have come back to find us. We—" He cut himself off when tears starting welling up in her eyes, and she looked away from them. "Misty, what happened?"

"They're gone," she said in a shaky voice, refusing to look up. "All of them. Those things got them. I tried to help Brock but his hand slipped away." She shook her head wildly. "How could I let his hand slip away?"

"Pikachu!," Pikachu whispered sadly, his ears dropping. He had absolutely no idea what was going on, but he knew that it wasn't good. He glanced up at the unfamiliar Pokemon and said, "Pikachu?"

"This is Lucario; he's the reason we were able to find you," Ash said, though his voice didn't have any of the normal enthusiasm in it. "Is there anything we can do?"

Lucario could feel the sadness emanating from the two people in front of him. As he watched them, he could almost see Ash's aura reaching out to all three Pokemon that were out with him as well as the girl, subconsciously either reaching out to comfort them or protect them. Lucario closed his eyes, a moment of shame hitting him when he remembered assuming Ash was any uncaring person. He couldn't have been farther from the truth.

It was because he was a good person that Lucario didn't want to tell him the truth, but at the same time, knew that he had to. "That is out of our hands. The only thing that can bring them back is the Tree of Beginning. And even then, it might not bring them back as they were. Or so Sir Aaron told me a long time ago."

"Really?" Misty asked slowly, clearly distraught.

"Well, it's like moving liquid from one bottle to another. Even if it seems like it, not every drop will transfer over."

They all jumped and looked around, Ash reeling back with shock as he eyes met the pale blue ones of the pale pink, cat-like Pokemon that floated over to them. His voice was light and happily, like a little boy's, and it had Ash's hat in his hands.

"Mew," he whispered in awe.

"And it's thanks to me that Pikachu's okay," another voice interrupted, but this one was much more familiar. They all looked around as Meowth leaned onto the ledge, having made it across the crystal bridges.

Though this Pokemon was generally the enemy, Misty instantly felt bad for him. She got the feeling that he was telling the truth, and for his troubles, his friends were gone, possibly forever. She walked to the ledge, still avoiding Ash's eyes, and helped pull him up.

"Thanks, Twerpette," he muttered, and she just shook her head.

"Mew!" The Pokemon did not like being ignored.

Ash looked around as Mew floated closer. For a brief moment, he was confused, remembering his earlier resentment of the Pokemon. He could see that this sweet, little thing never meant to cause

all this trouble; it was just another case of them being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Or maybe it was something more; he didn't know.

Pikachu jumped onto his head quickly and said, "Pika pika, cha pika chu!"

Pikachu trusted the Pokemon, and that was good enough for him. He smiled as he reached out and took his hat back into his hands, but what was someone supposed to say to a Legendary Pokemon that rescued their hat of all things? "Thank you, Mew, but...do you know any way to bring our friends back? Those orange things...took them." He put his hat back on his head.

Mew suddenly looked unhappy. "It might be possible, but it's never happened before."

Lucario's head snapped around quickly. Everyone followed his gaze, and they all got the same sinking feeling. Regice found them again.

"Seriously?" Ash mumbled under his breath. Though he had attacked Regice earlier, it was only to distract it enough so they could get away, not to harm it. Now though, he was seriously tempted to try and punch the ice golem. Not that it would do him any good at all.

Misty finally looked up, wiping away the water in her eyes, managing to keep from crying. She and Ash both quickly stood up, backing away a bit.

Psyduck moved towards the ledge, but she recalled him into her pokeball before he could fall. "Dumb duck," Misty mumbled affectionately as she stared at her pokeball, putting it back in her bag.

"Come on, guys!" Ash called out to Grovyle and Corphish as they started running into the cave, both of them following their master without question.

They were running with Lucario in the lead, but none of them knew exactly where they were going. Short of throwing themselves off the tree, it would take them forever to get back down, and that was with the Regis and those strange blobs chasing after them.

Lucario came to an abrupt stop in front of them, and they could easily see the glowing orange blobs coming at them.

"What are those things?" Meowth wondered.

"They're what swallowed everyone," Misty said as she eyed the creatures.

Meowth, who had seen Jessie and James with them earlier, looked up at them and asked in a voice that sounded so sad, like he already knew the answer, "Jessie and James too?"

Showing his never-ending sympathy for Pokemon, Ash's face twisted into a sad one, and he nodded his head silently. Misty observed her friend, knowing that he was trying not to cry at all costs. Ash Ketchum was always an emotional person, and since they had no clue what happened to someone when they were swallowed by those things, there was a possibility that their friends were actually dead, so for him to try and hold that back was a monumental task.

"We need to go," Lucario said. "Follow me." Lucario had no obligation to them now; he only promised Lady Ilene that he'd help them to Pikachu, but he wasn't about to leave them behind now.

They followed Lucario down another tunnel. Misty looked back over her shoulder and was a bit surprised to see that Mew was following them, but so were those three blobs.

"Up," Mew said suddenly, and they all did what he said.

"I think that might be sunlight," Ash said a moment later as the exit came into view.

"We're gonna be okay!" Meowth said happily.

"You'll be fine," Misty told him. "Those things don't hurt Pokemon."

They ran into a large cavern and came to a sudden stop. There was sunlight, but it was filtered through a massive crystal on the ceiling, much like back in the cavern where the Pokemon lived. They all looked around in awe, and Lucario said, "I'll look for an exit."

Lucario started to run to a tunnel, but he ran straight into Registeel, who latched onto him without any hesitation.

"Stop!" Mew cried out, but none of the Pokemon would listen to him as he darted around, clearly not wanting to attack or hurt them.

Misty, who was glancing behind them periodically, let out a yelp as the blobs came into the room and screamed, "Look out!"

Ash looked around and was able to move out of the way in time, barely paying attention to it zooming by him. Instead, his brown eyes were locked onto the one slowly forming behind Misty, and to him, it felt like everything was going in slow motion.

"You prefer defense, whether you realize it or not, to protect those you care about," the memory of Lucario saying that to him came to the forefront of his mind as he started moving towards Misty.

His other friends were gone, but he couldn't let anything happen to Misty. He invited her to have a fun-filled few days, not to go on some wild journey with endless running, angry Legendaries, blob-things trying to eat them, and him developing unstable powers that could hurt them at any given time.

"Here, you will find it easier to use your aura because of how strongly it's concentrated." He looked down as his hands started to glow a bit.

"You could even make barriers between individual crystals and leave the area, and they would still function."

In that split second, Ash saw in his mind how Lucario was actually able to destroy those things with his aura sphere. That was the key. They didn't hurt Pokemon, and they could be defeated by aura. Attacking was useless though; he wasn't strong enough to fight everything there. All he wanted was to protect her. He held onto that thought as he rushed forward and pushed her out of the way.

"That is going to be your biggest strength here."

Misty screamed with surprise as he pushed her. She collided with one of the flimsier crystal stalagmites, the object shattering and falling around her. She pulled her legs away from them as the crystal started glowing the same faint green they did when Ash touched them, though he wasn't anywhere near them.

Her sea green eyes snapped up. In the split second it took to push her out of the way, and for her to be surrounded by the glowing crystals, one of the blobs surrounded Ash.

"Ash!" she cried out, pushing herself off the ground. She was about to step out of the circle of crystals around her, but another orange figure jumped at her. She braced herself, but the impact never came. Instead, it collided with an invisible shield that was visible just as it hit it, glowing a pale blue before fading away.

"Stay there!" Ash cried out as he struggled. "The aura is going through the crystals! It's keeping you safe!" He wasn't quite sure how he did it, but she was safe inside that circle, and that's what mattered. He felt weak and tired, barely able to struggle with the blob, and definitely not able to save himself using aura.

With a grunt of pain, he twisted a bit, staring down at Pikachu, who looked back at him with terror. "Protect Misty! Don't let those Regis break the circle around her. Find a way out, but stay safe!"

"Pikapi!"

He felt like he could barely move, but he forced himself to reach to his other pokeballs, releasing Phanphy and Swellow.

"Ash!" Misty screamed again, but she didn't move. She wanted to run over to try and help him, but it was like she was glued to the spot.

"It's okay," he managed to say, wincing as he struggled. His body was numb, and his legs were starting to go from being numb to experiencing nerve-twitching pain.

"Pikapi!"

"You can't save me," he said as he was pulled farther in, looking from his Pokemon to Misty and back. He was right when he thought he was going to die earlier; he was just wrong about when it was going to happen. There were so many thoughts rushing through his mind, so many things he wanted to say and do, but nothing could come out. "Hey Misty? I'm sorry. Watch them for me. Pikachu, take care of Misty. And make sure everyone knows that I lo—."

Misty fell to her knees as his head was pulled inside. She could only watch as Pikachu launched forward, grabbing onto his still free hand. Grovyle, Phanphy, and Corphish all grabbed onto him and started pulling, trying to pull their trainer out. Misty held her breath, unsure of what to do. She wanted to run, but those things were still around. Meowth stumbled back, horrified at what he was seeing, and Mew flew back and forth in the air, not quite sure what was going on.

"Ash!" Lucario called out as he struggled, not caring that Regirock and Regice had appeared on the scene. He broke away from Registeel, who willingly let him run away. By the time he got to where Ash was though, the orange blob and Ash were gone.

"Ash," Misty muttered, feeling like she was going to be sick. She breathed heavily, and this time, the tears actually fell from her eyes. They could always save him before—she could save him before, but this time there was nothing to save. He was gone. There was no body being held up by Pikachu in the ice cold water for her and Tracey to pull back to shore, no falling figure for Charizard to catch, and no solid-stone soul for the Pokemon tears to heal. There was nothing, and even Mew said that it might not be possible.

She didn't move from the protective circle, the stones still glowing around her. No more of those things appeared, and none of the Regis seemed interested in her at all. She was completely safe behind a shield that Ash somehow managed to create to save her, and that made her sick to her stomach. "You idiot! You dumb, stupid, moronic, twerpy little—" She slammed her hand into one of the crystals, not caring that she cut it.

"Pikachupi," Pikachu whimpered as he came over to her. Misty looked up at him, his tear-filled eyes staring back into her own, and she reached out, picking him up and pulling him to her. She thought nothing could hurt more than when she had to leave Ash and Brock for good, that it was the worst that could happen to her after her parents died, but now she felt like a haunt reached inside of her and ripped something very important out. It physically hurt, and she couldn't stop crying, no matter how much she wanted to. She threw away all thoughts of being the strong and proud Misty Waterflower. It didn't matter anymore. She let every single one of her friends down.

Swellow, Panphy, Grovyle, Lucario, and Meowth stood around where the trainer had vanished. Ash's Pokemon, even the aloof Grovyle, were all crying.

Just like how in the faint memories she had, even Charizard who despised Ash at the time, cried for him when he sacrificed himself to stop Mewtwo and Mew.

Pikachu wailed in her arms, and Misty shifted so that she was sitting instead of kneeling, rocking back and forth, trying to bring him some comfort. There was nothing she could do for him though.

"I'm sorry."

She and Pikachu both looked up as Mew appeared before them. Mew tilted its head curiously and held out the object in its hands. Misty felt her breath catch in her throat when she saw Ash's hat.

Ash's other Pokemon made their way over to them, staring with teary eyes at the only remains of their trainer.

Pikachu shook his head violently and said, "Pika pika. Pikapi."

Mew stared at them, looking around at all of the Pokemon. Meowth stood a little away, shaking his head with disbelief and sadness. Lucario was still as if unsure of what he should do.

Mew looked back at Pikachu, its own eyes filling with tears. It looked at Misty, who stared back.

"C-can't you do something?" she managed to get out, her voice sounding thick and hoarse from tears. "You're a Mew. The ancestor of all Pokemon. Bring him—bring him back." She closed her eyes tightly as she held Pikachu painfully close, but he didn't seem to mind. "I yelled at him. I always yell at him, but it's the last thing I really said to him, and then he—he sacrificed himself and kept me safe. Please." She shook her head and spoke in barely a whisper. "Please. Bring him back."

"Pikapi."

Mew closed his eyes, setting Ash's hat on top of Misty's head before it flew up into the air, a green glow appearing around its body as it yelled, "Meeeeeew!" The glow got stronger as he flew up to one of the large, crystal stalagmites on the floor.

The glow spread out from the crystal, spreading through the entire room and beyond.

Misty looked around in confusion, but her eyes fell on Meowth as he spoke in an awed whisper, "He listened to you."

Back in another large cavern, Squirtle, Mudkip, Blaziken, Munchlax, Fortress, two Weavile, and Bonsly all stood together silently. None of the Pokemon knew what to do, and none of them wanted to leave the spot where their trainers had fallen. When the crystals in the room began to glow green, they all looked up. The air suddenly felt warmer, more welcoming.

Three green shapes rose out of the floor. They were still for a moment before the glowing green

material sank back into the ground, leaving Kidd, Brock, May, and Max behind.

It took the Pokemon a moment to realize what happened, but Squirtle was the first to react. The small water Pokemon ran at May, throwing himself at her. May blinked in confusion, looking around at Max and Brock. Munchlax threw himself on Max, hugging him tightly, and Mudkip jumped onto Brock, who held the little Pokemon close. Kidd was completely taken back when her two Weavile jumped onto her.

She laughed and hugged them and then looked up with confusion, not understanding how they were there.

May grinned broadly as she looked down at Squirtle, who smiled back. She hugged the Pokemon tightly, letting happy tears fall. They were okay.

...

Cacnea and Chimecho both jumped with surprise at the two blobs that appeared. Neither Pokemon moved closer or away from them, not sure what to do. Both of James' Pokemon let out happy cries as their trainer and Jessie both appeared again. Cacnea didn't give James a chance to get his bearings, throwing its prickly body at him in a hug.

The pain let James know he was alive, the piercing squeal that escaped his lips let Jessie know she was alive.

The question was why.

...

Misty watched, not understanding what was going on as all of the crystals started glowing in the cavern. She inhaled sharply as a glowing, green sphere rose from the ground just in front of Ash's Pokemon, who all tensed up.

Then the glowing green mass vanished, leaving behind the slumped, kneeling form of Ash Ketchum.

Relief hit Misty so hard that all she could do was let go of Pikachu, letting her arms fall uselessly into her lap as she stared at his back with him facing the rest of his Pokemon. She watched as he shifted a bit, and his head rose slightly from his slumped position. She let out a breath as new tears welled up in her eyes again. He was okay.

Ash was more than a bit confused when he opened his eyes. The last thing he remembered was pain, and a lot of it. He knelt on the cold, hard rock, not quite sure what to do with himself. He was dazed and confused, staring at his Pokemon unsurely.

"Pikapi!"

He jerked a bit at the loud, happy cry as Pikachu bounded around him and then up into his arms. A smile broke his confusion, as the memories rushed back and he held the Pokemon close.

"Pikachu."

"Phanpy!" the little Pokemon cried out as it charged, jumping on Ash and startling him. Corphish followed that lead, and the two of them combined managed to force him to the ground, Swellow and Grovyle moving in close to them. Swellow flapped its wings happily as he cried out, while Grovyle tried to look as if he was unaffected, but there were a few tears in his eyes.

Lucario smiled warmly at the scene, happy that they were all okay. He turned and looked bend him at Registeel, Regirock, and Regice, who simply turned away and left the room without attempting to attack. He closed his eyes and sensed throughout the caverns, and while he could feel Ash's friends and those other strange people, he couldn't feel any more of those disturbing orange creatures. They were safe.

Misty watched, unmoving from the spot she was in as Ash laughed as his Pokemon hugged, nuzzled, and licked him. A smile started to appear on her face as it truly registered with her that he was okay, that he wasn't just a figment of her imagination.

Meowth turned to face her, having been watching the scene, and said, "Ya know Mew only listened because of you, right? Maybe he woulda done the right ting if ya weren't here too, but we don't know dat."

Misty thought on that as she looked back at Ash, taking him in. His movements were a little slow and sluggish, but he was still there. Of course, she had rescued him again (in a way), and she should growl at him for being reckless (again), but she found herself unable to string a coherent sentence together.

Pikachu's ears twitched a bit, and he looked up at her. A smile appeared on his face, and he muttered, "Pikachupi."

Ash shot up, suddenly remembering that Misty was there too. He looked around with alarm, not seeing her anywhere in his line of vision, before twisting himself around. His eyes met hers, and relief rushed through him. She was okay; she was still inside of that circle, behind the shield he willed into existence. She never suffered through the pain he and everyone else had.

They just stayed in their separate sitting positions, staring at one another. Ash felt guilt build up in him when he saw her red-rimmed eyes that were still filled with tears. Misty hated crying, and it looked like she'd been crying a lot. Though the thought of causing her pain was appalling to him, he also felt a little relieved that she had such a strong reaction to him. Instead of trying to think about why that was, he smiled at her and said, "Misty."

Hearing her name come from him seemed to break some sort of willpower in her. The next thing Misty knew, she flung herself at him, colliding with him with enough force to knock him back a bit, the only thing keeping them both from falling back was the arm he used to brace himself. Her arms went around his neck, and she started sobbing on his shoulder.

Ash panicked. He knew what to do with a raging Misty, an annoyed Misty, and a happy Misty. A sad Misty always confused him, but he had no idea what to do with a hysterical Misty. Pushing himself into a sitting position, he decided not to think and went with what felt right. He moved his arms around her and hugged her tightly, resting his cheek on her hair.

Misty moved back from him just a little bit, staring at him blankly. She opened her mouth to say something, but then closed it again, unsure of what to say or do. Whatever she might have wanted to say, Ash didn't get the chance to think about it. One second, she was staring at him, the next, she was kissing him.

Ash froze. He didn't know what to do. He was more than just a little shocked and confused. He was embarrassed, unsure, and suddenly shy. At the same time though, he felt excited and happy. It was hard to keep up with his racing thoughts, no one ever kissed him like that before. Somewhere between his racing thoughts though, he went with his instincts, closed his eyes and kissed her back, unsurely and hesitantly.

Misty didn't think about her actions, having an appreciation for why Ash didn't like to overthink

things. Over thinking things led to doubts, which led to people not doing things like this. It was warm, and she felt like all the little pieces that broke earlier were suddenly fixed again. The only thoughts that she had were the mental cheering when he kissed her back and the thought that she needed air.

She pulled back quickly, leaving them both more than a little dazed as she shifted and sat beside him, her face turning bright red as her heart hammered in her chest. Now the thoughts were catching up to her. As she berated herself for her actions, she looked up through her orange bangs at Ash.

His face was just as red as hers, and he was glaring at his snickering Pokemon. His eyes looked back at her, and he looked away shyly. Misty opened her mouth to apologize when he suddenly smiled at her. He pushed himself to his feet, wobbling a bit as he did, and held his hand out to her silently. His face slowly turned back to a normal colour, though his cheeks stayed pink.

Misty smiled back and took his hand, letting him pull her up. She felt more than a little giddy when he didn't immediately let go of her hand, but didn't say anything on it. She knew that she liked him a lot and was willing to wait for him to sort out what he felt too, so she wasn't going to push him.

"What happened?" Ash asked after a moment, looking over at Misty curiously.

"Mew had a chat with that old tree," Meowth said, putting one hand on his hip and pointing a finger up into the air. "Said you wasn't nasty germs after all."

Ash stared at the Pokemon skeptically and said, "Really Meowth?"

"Hey, it's true," Meowth argued, pointing at Misty. "She asked him to. Well, more like begged him to."

Ash looked over at Misty, who looked down at the floor, her face going red again. He stared at her for a moment before smiling and squeezing her hand, not saying anything else.

"I'm sorry," Mew whispered suddenly, startling them all.

Ash couldn't focus on the Legendary Pokemon though, completely distracted by the raging torrents of violent energy flowing through the Tree of Beginning like a burning fever. He looked over at Lucario, who shifted, also on edge.

"What's wrong with its aura?"

"I don't know," Lucario answered with a shake of his head.

"Mew," the Pokemon said as he floated over to them, snatching the backwards hat off of Misty's head (how had Ash missed that?) and went to give it to Ash, but he fell.

"Mew!" Ash cried out in surprise, letting go of Misty's hand as he grabbed the Pokemon, not caring that his hat hit the floor.

"He's so warm."

Misty picked up his hat and put it back on his head as she looked close at the Legendary Pokemon. His cheeks were red, and as she touched his head, she jerked back her hand with surprise. He was more than a little warm.

"What's wrong?" Meowth asked.

Ash looked around quickly, watching in horror as the crystals started cracking and falling, expelling thick, black smoke as if the orange colour was actually fire inside of them. This felt wrong. He could feel his own aura building in him, able to recognize the feeling against this negative energy now. Aura was the essence of life, like Lucario explained, so this had to be the opposite. Suddenly, he understood. Mew was fine when the tree was fine, but when it was like this...

"This is bad," Ash muttered, looking down at the Pokemon in his arms.

"What?" Misty asked him.

"Mew's not sick," Ash said. "He's dying."

Sky

The Sacrifice

Mew was struggling to breathe, let alone keep his eyes open. That was something they could all see. Ash kept Mew close to his chest, cradling him like he was a newborn child. No one was quite sure what to do, because as far as they knew, there was no way to fight against death. Not like this, at least.

Meowth's ears twitched a bit and he looked around. "James?"

Misty looked at the pokemon and said, "We have to find them. They're your friends."

Meowth glanced back at Mew almost hesitantly. He may have been a crook, but he was still a Pokemon and leaving while a Legendary Pokemon like Mew was dying didn't feel right. Misty nudged him gently, and he understood that he couldn't do anything for Mew. With a quick glance at the Pokemon, he started running towards the tunnel he heard James's yell come from. No doubt Cacnea jumped on him again.

"What do we do?" Ash asked, his eyes focused on Lucario. He could feel his aura pulsing in him, like it wanted to lash out against all of this negative energy around them.

Lucario could feel it too, and he was honestly worried that Ash's power would accidentally burst out and hurt someone. With all the power that was bursting out in negative waves, he wouldn't be able to sense Ash in time to stop him, not like before when he shoved him under the water. That was the least of their problems though.

Ash balanced two pokeballs in each hand, and said, "Return, everyone." He didn't want to expose his Pokemon to this, just in case it hurt them. He had half a mind to put Pikachu in his pokeball too, but he was sure that wouldn't go over well.

"What's happening?" Misty asked with confusion.

"It's...dying," Lucario said slowly. "Concentrate and feel, Ash."

He didn't need to concentrate; he could easily feel the pain and suffering that seemed to be coming from the earth itself.

"We have to get out of here then," Misty said, sounding more than a little reluctant, and Ash knew why. The tree dying at the same time Mew was dying was clearly not coincidence. Ash could feel it in him.

"It won't matter."

They all looked over at Lucario.

"What do you mean?" Ash asked him.

"You've already seen that this place is filled with aura unlike other places. It's built up strongly around here because of the Tree of Beginning. If the tree dies, this extra energy will have nothing to flow through. It'll lash out."

"Like a massive scale version of mine, right?" Ash asked, catching on quickly. "You said I can't control it, so now that it's really flowing through me, I could accidentally hurt something if I lose control. If the Tree's not here to control it..." He trailed off, shuddering at the thought.

"Same principle," Lucario agreed. "Just much, much worse."

"How bad?" Misty asked.

"Give how far the 'veins' of the Tree of Beginning reaches out, it will completely destroy here, Cameron Palace, the towns and villages nearby, and probably affect anything closer. Remember, I don't know how much the world's changed."

"It'll probably affect power grids and things like that too," Misty mumbled as she shook her head. "This will be bad for all Kanto." They could feel everything shaking and breaking down under their feet. She closed her eyes for a moment and then asked, "What can we do?"

She'd been in life-threatening situations before; it was almost a mandatory thing when traveling with Ash Ketchum, but she was still scared. She wanted keep on her angry face, not wanting to let anyone see how scared she was, but she couldn't seem to shake the fear. She jerked with pain when a piece of a crumbling crystal hit her leg; it was burning hot.

Ash grabbed her hand to keep her steady, but he didn't let go. If anything, it was this that let Misty realize just how scared he was too.

"Mew mew mew."

They both looked at the Legendary as it spoke, floating out of Ash's arms. He pointed a tiny arm while staring directly at Ash and started floating towards one of the tunnels.

"He wants us to follow him," Ash said. "Telepathy must take more energy for him to use."

"Pika pika," Pikachu agreed from atop his shoulder.

They followed Mew through one of the tunnels, and not a moment too soon, as something broke down behind them, causing the ground to shake.

For something that was so sick, Mew moved surprisingly quickly through the tunnel. It was only when they emerged in another large room that Mew fell. Misty was the one who caught him this time, holding him close to her chest as she looked around. "What is this place?" she whispered in awe as she stared at the center of the room.

"I don't know," Ash replied, squeezing her hand as they took a few steps forward.

In the center of the room was a giant, crystalline structure that looks almost like a blossomed flower, but the amazing part was the bright orange energy that pulsed upwards out of it.

Ash could feel the strength coming from it. The power was all wrong. It was messed up, backwards, and dangerous, but it was still amazing. He couldn't tear his eyes away from it.

Lucario felt the same way, but something out of the corner of his eye did catch his attention. He gasped in surprise and moved across the room quickly.

Ash's head shot towards him, and without a word, he followed the Pokemon, tugging Misty behind him. They stopped behind Lucario as he knelt down in front of more crystals. He was still for a moment, staring at what looks like a familiar pair of gloves.

"Could it be?" Lucario whispered out loud. "These are his gloves, but..." Lucario trailed off as he touched the gloves resting over the crystals, looking up at the large amount of crystals beside the small ones. He stared at it for a moment before saying, "Sir Aaron?"

"What?" Ash blurted out, brown eyes staring at the structure. He and Misty both leaned forward to

look at it closer as Lucario put his hand up, a tiny aura sphere floating in front of him.

A distinctly human shape trapped within the crystals responded to it, glowing the same colour and becoming visible.

The three humans all gaped in shock, and Lucario said, "It is you."

"How's that possible?" Misty added.

Ash thought it over, his mind going a mile a minute, trying to comprehend what was going on. He glanced at Misty and said, "Maybe after he sealed Lucario, he came here. To this place." He put his hand on the floor, feeling the aura pulsing quickly through it, like a sick, rapid heartbeat. He blinked with surprise when he realized it was exactly what it was. "This is the heart of the tree, isn't it?"

Lucario nodded his head, not taking his eyes away from Sir Aaron.

Ash let go of Misty's hand as he walked closer towards the structure in the center of the room, the light from the energy not bothering him a bit. There had to be an answer to her question here somewhere. This was the last place Sir Aaron stood, and there had to be a reason.

"Pika!" Pikachu suddenly exclaimed, pointing down at the ground.

"Huh?" Ash followed his paw, and instantly recognized the object that caught Pikachu attention. "A time flower! It lets someone with aura see a moment from the past." He added the explanation in for Pikachu's benefit, since he wasn't there when they first stumbled onto the flowers. He knelt down in front of it, somehow knowing that his answer was in there. Reaching out, Ash heard Pikachu gasp as the flower responded to his touch, opening up and unleashing an orb of light.

A black and white memory appeared around them, overlapping with reality. Sir Aaron walked through the room, looking around, before he called out, "Where are you, Mew?"

Ash jumped a bit when he heard the screeching of a bird and had a brief image of Moltres launching fire at him. He shoved that memory away as he paid attention to the memory playing before them. Sir Aaron turned around, looking at one of the tunnels that was high up in the cavern. Not Moltres, but Ho-oh sat there, staring down at Sir Aaron for a moment. Its body started to glow, shifting back into the tiny Mew that was with them now.

The Mew in the memory flew down in front of Sir Aaron, and he said, "Mew, I realize that you and this tree are one. This fighting has shifted the power of the tree, and I know you can set it right, but you need help. Please, take my aura, and save the people."

"Mew," Mew nodded his head.

"Now," Sir Aaron called out, stretching his hand out in front of him and towards Mew, "Accept the aura!"

An aura sphere appeared in front of his hand, the crystals on his gloves shimmering with the focused energy. Ash blinked with surprise as Misty was suddenly at his side. She looked over at him and said, "We're going to watch him die, aren't we?"

He honestly never thought of that and looked back at the memory. Sir Aaron's aura sphere grew and surrounded Mew. Ash cringed, like he could feel the energy within him that he was unaware of until recently being pushed out all at once. Sir Aaron was literally giving his life to Mew in order to save the people.

"The power of aura will prevail!" Sir Aaron called out. His body was pulsing and shaking with the energy that he was forcing away from his body.

Lucario stared with horror. He knew that there was no way any Aura Guardian could survive a sacrifice like that. Sir Aaron's yell echoed through the cavern as Mew's energy exploded outwards. Then the memory vanished.

Pikachu was incredibly confused. He ran to where the man stood moments before, looking around with wide eyes. He looked back to Ash and let out a whine.

"Sir Aaron sacrificed himself to save the kingdom and restore peace," Misty muttered. "And Lucario...oh Lucario, I'm so sorry. You thought—" She looked away, unable to say anything else about it, and not quite sure of exactly what she wanted to say.

Lucario walked over to Sir Aaron's crystalline tomb, kneeling down in front of it. "Forgive me for doubting you, Master." He bowed his head in shame.

"This room's starting to crumble too," Ash said, looking up as smoke started appearing in the room. "That's probably a really bad thing, right?"

"If this is the heart of the tree..." Misty said, trailing off and letting him come to his own conclusion. He didn't like it.

"Mew," Mew said, pushing away from her and flying through the air weakly. He flew over to Lucario. "Mew! Mew mew mew!"

"If we use the power of aura, we can save the Tree?" Lucario asked, translating for them, though that wasn't his purpose.

Mew nodded his head.

"I'll help you, Mew," Lucario said firmly as he stood up.

"Wait," Misty called out, taking a few steps towards him. "You have to give Mew your aura so he can have the power to reset the tree, right? Won't you end up like Sir Aaron?"

"Yes, I know," he said to her with a nod. "If I don't, thousands could die."

"Lucario..." Ash mumbled from a few steps behind her, sounding like he wanted to say something else, but couldn't get it out. Finally, he asked, "Even if it means you end up just like him? Trapped in time?"

"Yes." Lucario put his paw up to his chest for a moment as he faced Mew. "The power of aura is with me!"

They watched as Lucario closed his eyes, holding his hand up to Mew like Sir Aaron did in the memory. An aura sphere appeared in front of him, growing and surrounding Mew.

Ash was glad that Misty wasn't facing him or holding his hand. It looked like Lucario's aura was growing around Mew, but he could feel it fluctuating. Lucario wasn't strong enough alone. He looked down at his own hands, feeling the energy that was brimming in his veins.

The aura vanished from around Mew, and Lucario said, "It's not working. I'm not strong enough."

"What now?" Misty asked, hoping that someone could come up with an idea.

Ash pictured Sir Aaron in his mind, his face twisting up with pain. Then he imagined the damage

that would come if they couldn't help Mew save the Tree of Beginning, and his mind was made up. He looked at Sir Aaron's gloves and ran towards them, pulling his own off.

"Ash?" Lucario asked, watching as he picked up Sir Aaron's gloves and put them on.

"You said my aura's been lashing out, right? You've been stopping me from hurting my friends because of that," Ash said, not making eye contact with any one as he tested the gloves out. The gems on them started to glow a bit as a very small aura sphere appeared in front of his hand. He stopped concentrating, and it vanished. He could feel the power concentrating through the gloves already.

"Yes. You're quite powerful; it could have hurt all your friends."

"Well, we might as well let that power come out and be put to good use," Ash said firmly as he straightened himself up, making eye contact with Lucario. "I told you I didn't want this, but I have it, so let's put it to the test."

"Are you insane?" Misty burst out, lunging forward and grabbing his arm as he was about to hold it out.

"You said I didn't think earlier, remember?" Ash asked her. "You asked me what would have been the point of this journey to find Pikachu if he and I died just after finding him, right? Well what's the point of not giving it my all if we're just going to die anyway?"

"Ash," she muttered, staring at him almost helplessly, though she let her arm fall. He wasn't going to listen to her on this. He'd sacrifice himself for the greater good any time it called for him, and she already knew that from past experience.

"Pikapi..." Pikachu whispered sadly. Misty turned to the Pokemon, picking him up into her arms and holding him close.

Ash held up his hands and closed his eyes. It took a few seconds, but a small glowing orb started to appear in front of him. He glanced over at Misty, who was staring at him with almost accusing eyes. "Everyone around here will die if I don't help. All the people...the Pokemon. I won't give up!" He closed his eyes again, pushing more of his energy out of his body as his aura sphere grew.

Lucario stared at him for a moment before holding his own hands out and closing his eyes, an aura sphere appearing in front of him much quicker than it had for Ash.

The two auras combined together and surrounded Mew. Misty wanted to close her eyes as tears built up again; she didn't want to watch her friend sacrifice himself, but she couldn't look away. It was a bitter sweet feeling, because she was so proud of him too.

The room was crumbling around them, but still they didn't stop.

Ash felt a wave of pain rush through him, like a powerful thundershock from Pikachu, as his body started to glow like Sir Aaron's had in the memory. He closed his eyes and kept forcing his aura out, feeling himself become light headed and weaker as he did, waves of pain rushing through him.

"Pikapi!" Pikachu cried out, watching as his trainer shook.

Lucario's eyes opened at Pikachu's yell, and he looked over at Ash. This boy who he thought was so weak and undeserving of his powers was anything but that in his eyes now. He didn't deserve this fate. From what he learned, aura was an incredibly rare gift in this time, and to have someone with so much potential die at such a young age, even for a just cause, felt wrong to Lucario. He couldn't let that happen. After giving away so much of the built-up aura, Lucario knew he wouldn't

be a danger to lash out. It would build up again in him, but not in a dangerous way. Not after this.

A green glow started to surround Mew's body, and that's when Lucario moved. He jerked at Ash while still focusing his aura and shoved the young teenager aside.

Completely caught off-guard, Ash was easily thrown aside. He was exhausted, and his entire body hurt, so he didn't have the strength to hold his ground when Lucario hit him. His aura abruptly stopped flowing from his body as he flew to the floor, sliding a little on the smooth surface.

"Ash!"

"Pikapi!"

Misty ran to his side with Pikachu. He looked up at Lucario and tried to push himself up, but struggling a little until Misty helped him sit up all the way. He stared at the Pokemon and said, "Lucario!"

"Leave the rest to me, Ash," he replied, looking back with a grin. "The aura is with me!"

Ash tried to get up, but now that his concentration was broke, the exhaustion hit him hard. He slumped against Misty as Pikachu jumped into his lap, and he watched as the aura around Mew exploded in a blast of green light. Everyone but Ash looked away from it. It dimmed, leaving a green sphere of energy surrounding Mew's body.

The Legendary Pokemon flew up at the flowing energy and went inside of it. The reaction was almost instantaneous as the orange light was replaced with green, flowing out to the rest of the tree, and everything became calm once again.

Everything was silent for a moment until Mew flew back out. Its feverish look was gone, and even in his weakened state, Ash could feel the life flowing through him again. He could feel it in the tree too. Everything was going to be okay.

"Ash," Misty said, putting a hand on his shoulder, "Are you okay?"

Ash looked up at her, blushing a bit when he realized how close they were, but he didn't back away. He nodded and said, "Tired, I guess."

"You look like you got beat up by your old Primeape."

He snorted. "You're one to talk." It was true. Between the two of them, they had more cuts and bruises than most traveling trainers tended to get on a daily basis. They were sweaty, dirty, and complete exhausted, yet he felt more awake than only a few moments before. The adrenaline that came with success, knowing that everything was going to be okay, seemed to give him a boost.

He stood back up with a bit of help from his friend, leaning onto her a little to keep himself steady. He smiled as Mew flew around them happily.

Lucario watched all of this, ignoring the faint, blue glow around his body. He had so very little energy left, and he knew that his time was running out. He didn't regret it. He protected his kingdom like he swore he would, he protected his queen, and he saved the life of a future Aura Guardian, even if he wouldn't officially take that title. He was relieved. Lucario stopped fighting against gravity and let himself fall.

"Lucario!" Ash cried out, lurching away from Misty and stumbling over to the Pokemon. Pikachu remained on the redhead's shoulder as she followed him, moving over to the injured, glowing

Pokemon.

Ash knelt down in front of Lucario, and the Pokemon looked up at him. "There's nothing you can do for me, Ash."

"Are you sure?" he asked, and Misty knew that he was once again putting on a brave face. Maybe he wouldn't burst into tears like when she first met him, but he would still feel the same pain, even with a brave face. He fiddled with the gloves still on his hands.

"Don't," Misty said quickly, putting her hand on top of his. Ash glanced at her and looked back down.

"Your aura can't help me," Lucario assured him. "There is something you can do for me, though."

"Anything," Ash answered quickly.

"Keep those gloves. Practice controlling your aura. A few people in the world need to know how. It won't lash out."

"Are you sure? These are Sir Aaron's," Ash said reluctantly.

"Yes." A rush of energy passed through Lucario, and he jerked from pain, his hand falling to the floor next to a time flower that none of them had noticed before. Reacting to the last bit of aura Lucario had in him, the flower opened up and started to play a memory.

Directly beside Lucario, Sir Aaron slumped to the ground. He took his gloves off of his hands, setting them onto the crystals where they found them and leaned back. The same glow and waves of energy surrounded him as well. Sir Aaron struggled with the pain for a moment before looking off into the distance, a sad expression on his face. "Lucario. Forgive me."

To Lucario, it almost felt as if Sir Aaron was speaking to him in the same time and space. The time didn't really matter though. His words were heard and acknowledged all the same. "I forgive you, Master."

"Please understand, I had to seal you inside of the staff," Sir Aaron continued, as if he knew that Lucario would one day stumble onto that very time flower to find the memory. Maybe he had. "I knew that if I didn't, you would follow me here and suffer the same fate. I only wish you could have known the real story."

Lucario had tears in his eyes now. "I understand."

"One day, someone will wake you up from that staff. In a distant and more peaceful time. I wonder what it'll be like." He smiled as he looked up. "I wonder if—" He groaned in anguish.

"Oh Arceus," Misty said suddenly, looking away. "I can't watch this." She didn't care if it was awkward or not, she buried her face into the fabric of Ash's shirt, her forehead resting against his neck. She felt his pulse pick up a bit, but he didn't push her away.

Ash was embarrassed, but he understood. Though she was tough, Misty was a very sympathetic person (even if most people didn't believe that). Watching this was absolutely heartbreaking. He moved his arm around her shoulders and leaned his head on hers a bit. She wasn't the only one that needed some comfort right now.

"I have no regrets," Sir Aaron said. "My journey has been good. I served a beautiful queen, and you and I shared many adventures." He closed his eyes with a smile on his face. "Those memories

will always be with me."

"Master," Lucario said, shaking with tears. "If only you could hear me. I want to tell you how much you mean to me."

"Lucario, farewell," he said, the smile never leaving his face. "You were more to me than just my student. You are my closest friend."

"I feel the same," Lucario choked out.

"Pikapi," Pikachu whimpered, crawling off of Misty's shoulder and curling up in Ash's lap. Using his free arm, Ash brought Pikachu close to him. He was a bit surprised when Misty reached out too, comforting the Pokemon, but just smiled a bit as he tried to keep his tears in, a bit surprised that he managed to not break down yet.

"It could be," Sir Aaron said as he opened his eyes, his own tears building up, "that one day, we will see each other again." He closed his eyes, letting a single tear fall down his cheek, but his smile never faded. "But, before that, I want you to have more adventures with new people, to live life to its fullest. I hope so, my friend." Sir Aaron faded away, and then the memory vanished.

Lucario didn't stop his tears from falling, sobbing as he knelt in front of the place where Aaron was trapped. "Sir Aaron, my friend, I'm sorry I let you down."

"That's not true!" Ash burst out, startling Misty and Pikachu. He let go of Pikachu, leaving him on his lap, reaching out and taking Lucario's paw in his free hand. "You proved that you're a true Guardian of Aura! Just like Sir Aaron. He'd be proud."

Lucario smiled at him and said, "Thank you, Ash." He cried out in pain as he fell back, sparks of energy flying off of his body.

Misty sat up straight and took Pikachu off of Ash's lap silently, allowing the young teenager to lurch forward and grab Lucario's paw with both hands. "Please hold on!"

"I'm sorry, Ash," he said, managing to cast him a smile. "I've already accepted it."

Ash watched as Lucario's body actually started to fade away, not understanding what was happening. He thought that it was just an effect from the time flower, watching Sir Aaron, but it really seemed to be happening. He didn't understand it, and he didn't like it. Ash could only hold on as Lucario faded away, only a sphere of energy remaining.

A second sphere rose out of the crystals, surprising Ash enough to make him stand up and back away.

They all watched in awe as Lucario's aura started to rise up, but Sir Aaron's aura pulsed powerfully, pulling Lucario's dimmer aura back. They all shielded their eyes from the bright light, but Ash could feel something incredibly strange pulsing through him.

He opened his eyes first and was taken back as a sphere floated down to him. Misty and their Pokemon were all watching as he slowly reached out, taking hold of the sphere. He gasped with surprise, expecting it to be warm energy like every other ball of light he'd seen that day, but it was solid and hard.

The light faded away, and he blinked with surprise at what he saw. There was an egg in his hands.

"Ash..." Misty trailed off, not quite sure what to say. "How's that possible?"

Ash stared at the egg. He could feel the small, gentle waves of aura pulsing from it and stared with confusion. "Is this...Lucario?"

"Not exactly," they all looked around at Mew. "I told you before that things that leave and come back don't always come back the same. Lucario is with Sir Aaron, but the thing with aura is that it never dies. It just goes back into the world and joins a new soul. You can look at this little Riolu as a reincarnation, but maybe not the exact same one. Does that make sense?"

Ash closed his eyes, reaching out to the aura he felt from the egg. "Yeah. It feels really similar, but it's not the exact same."

"That's because he's going to get a fresh start," Misty said with a grin, walking beside him to stare at the egg. "He's going to get that chance to grow up without war, with you this time. He probably won't be the exact same, but he's still here."

Ash couldn't help but laugh and cry. He looked over at Misty, taking in her smile and teary eyes. She reached out, taking one of his hands into hers. He easily balanced the egg in one arm, squeezing her hand comfortingly.

He closed his eyes for a moment before opening them again. Using the hand that was holding hers, he jerked her closer to him and pulled her into a one-armed hug, Pikachu moving onto her shoulder as he held the Riolu egg.

It was over. Pikachu was back, the Tree of Beginning and Mew were both okay, and Lucario's spirit, thanks to Sir Aaron's, was given a second chance at life.

It was all over, but it was also a new beginning.

...

"What do you think happened?" May asked as she watched the glow from the crystals vanish, still cradling Bonsly in her arms. The warm wind brushed her hair against her face gently, and she closed her eyes to enjoy it. They came far too close to dying this time to take anything for granted.

"Well, whatever it was, it saved all of us," Brock said to her.

"I have to admit," Kidd said to them, "I'm a bit disappointed that I didn't get to see what happened. But I don't think this place should be disturbed by anyone else. I don't want this to happen ever again. I'll have Banks cancel the show."

Max caught movement out of the corner of his eye and looked down the hill at the cavern below. He let out a gasp when Ash and Misty walked out of the cave, side by side, both looking like they were limping a little. Pikachu was perched on Ash's shoulder.

Ash looked around, catching sight of them, and relief overtook him. "You guys are okay!"

The four of them (plus Bonsly) cried out happily, rushing down the hill to meet their friends.

"Are you guys okay?" May asked, eyeing both of them with a worried expression that belonged on a mother, not an eleven-year-old.

"We're alive," Ash said in a quiet voice with a half-hearted shrug.

Max looked around them, before noticing that not everyone was there. "Where's Lucario?"

Misty stared at him sadly, her eyes shifting to Ash. He looked away from Max, turning to look out at the landscape beyond the Tree of Beginning. It seemed so treacherous when Lucario led them through it. He wondered how they were going to get out without him.

"Lucario..." he mumbled, unsure of what to tell Max. Pikachu stared at and nuzzled his cheek, looking back at the backpack that was securely on Ash's back, the egg packed carefully inside. "Lucario gave everything that he had in order to save this place."

"Oh Ash," May said sadly. "I wish there was something we could have done to help it."

Ash continued to stare up at the sky, smiling before he looked at the people around him one at a time. He shook his head and moved his hand into his front pocket, feeling Sir Aaron's gloves still securely in there.

"Maybe it's for the best," Brock spoke up.

"Yeah," Kidd agreed, "But it's still hard to believe that Lucario's gone."

Ash wasn't sure the last time he felt such a bitter twist of emotions before. Technically, Lucario died, though he was given the chance to live again, to have a new start. It was good and bad. Still, he couldn't help but smile softly and say, "He's not gone. Not entirely."

Despite the fact that everything was okay now, Ash couldn't help but find that everything was starting to hurt. His adrenaline was quickly wearing off, letting his exhaustion and general aches in his body hit him hard.

Pikachu noticed it first. Ash started to wobble a bit, his eyes fluttering. Pikachu's eyes widened in alarm and he yelled, "Pikapi!"

Ash barely registered the panicked yell as he felt himself starting to fall forward and his vision went black.

Sky

His Aura Is With Me

The first thing that he registered was the voices he could hear around him. They were whispering, so it was impossible for him to hear exactly what was being said. The next thing he became aware of was the aches in his body, but it wasn't nearly as bad as just before he passed out.

Mortification suddenly hit Ash. He passed out, while standing at the edge of a cliff with Pikachu on his shoulder and the egg in his backpack. He was sure that went over well. Slowly, he cracked his eyes opened, expecting harsh sunlight to enter his eyes and to see the clear sky above the Tree of Beginning. Neither of those things happened. He was in a room, in a rather large and comfortable bed, and there was no light to assault him because it was night.

"Pikapi!"

His head shot around with alarm at the sudden sound, and the next thing Ash knew, Pikachu launched himself at him, holding onto him tightly while nuzzling his furry cheek into Ash's shirt. It took Ash a moment to realize what happened, but then he smiled and hugged his Pokemon close. "Pikachu."

His eyes snapped open again, and he looked around wildly, relief instantly hitting him when he saw the egg. It was beside him in the bed, its aura pulsing comfortingly. He sighed and reached out, bringing the egg into his arms.

"Pikachu pika cha," Pikachu said to him, glancing at the egg.

"It's been here with me this whole time? That's go—wait, whole time? How long was I out? And where are we?" He looked around with confusion.

"Pikachu pi pika pika chu pikachu pika pika chaa pika." Pikachu explained to him, making motions with his hands. To anyone else, it would have sounded like nonsense, but Ash understood in a way that few others could comprehend.

"So I passed out and almost fell off a cliff, Brock saved me, and then we all came back to Cameron Castle, and I've been out for two days?" Ash asked, wanting to clarify that he got the story right.

"Chaa," Pikachu said while nodding his head.

"And you're sure the egg was okay?"

Pikachu nodded his head happily.

Ash let out a sigh of relief, glancing at his Pokemon for a moment before asking, "And everyone else? Are they okay?"

Once again, he nodded his head, but then smirked a bit and asked, "Pikapi? Pika cha Pikachupi?"

Ash looked at Pikachu, and his face burned at the Pokemon's rather innocent but teasing question. It was funny, how such a small, simple question could be so difficult to answer. Did he like Misty? He didn't know. He certainly liked her as a friend. Every time he called her when he was away, or every time they met up, it was like no time passed at all, like she was still traveling with him every day. If anything, they became friendlier with one another. They fought less over small, pitiful things, though that didn't stop them from teasing and arguing completely. That was just who they were, and there was nothing wrong with it. He wouldn't trade her for any of his other friends either.

So he guessed that he could definitely say she was probably his best (human) friend. He didn't really include Brock in that description, since Brock was basically his older brother. Beyond that though, that was where it got tricky.

He knew for himself more than anything that he had to at least try to figure out what happened between them during this whole adventure. He couldn't deny that something was different. He'd been missing her more and more lately, though that didn't make sense, because he thought he would get used to her being gone. He was so excited when she agreed to meet up with them to the point that everyone noticed him acting different when they first got to Cameron Castle. He felt strange when he danced with her that night too, but he couldn't place it. As far as he knew, he was just going crazy.

His face burned with a fierce blush as he remembered her kissing him. Pikachu must have figured out what he was thinking of, if his mischievous grin said anything. Did he regret that? Not really. It was strange, yes, but it wasn't repulsive or anything like that. He smiled a bit without meaning to as he glanced over at her. Along with feeling shy and embarrassed, he'd felt happy. Other girls kissed him on the cheek before, like Melody and Bianca (or possibly Latias as Bianca, he still wasn't sure), but he never had this exact same reaction. The feeling was like friendship, but on rare candies.

Ash shook his head. He honestly had no idea, but maybe he could accept that he was starting to like her as more than a friend. He knew Misty, and he knew that she'd give him the time he needed to figure that out. Especially since she'd be leaving soon. That thought made him sad, but there was nothing he could do about it. As much as he would have loved for Misty to travel with him everywhere, he knew that she couldn't, at least not for long. Her sisters couldn't take care of the gym on their own, and right now being a Gym Leader was the most conducive thing that she could do to reach her own goals, and he wanted nothing more for her than that.

It didn't make saying goodbye any easier. Nothing did. He did it over and over again, setting Pokemon free like Butterfree and Pidgeot, or just letting them go to do their own thing even if they still technically belonged to him like Squirtle and Charizard. It was the right thing to do, letting everyone free to find their own path and their own way in life. He knew that, at some point of time, May, Max, and Brock would go in their own directions too, and that he'd probably make more friends, but that didn't change how much he'd miss the ones he left behind.

He frowned a bit at that. He looked down at the egg, feeling the aura pulsing from it, and for the first time in his life, he felt unsure about what he was going to do with himself. Sure, not everything had changed, but it was enough to make him feel confused. He couldn't just ignore these abilities he had now, for the sake of both the Lucario that died and the new Riolu that would hatch one day. This was life changing, no matter which way he looked at it.

Ash didn't know how long he was there brooding on the subject, but he missed the sun rising into the sky, his brown eyes focused and unseeing as his mind raced in a hundred directions at once. He didn't even notice the door to the room he was in open or hear a sigh of relief.

What he did notice was the presence of someone coming towards him. He knew that she was there without even having to look at her, and said, "Hi Misty."

If she was startled by this, she didn't show it. She sat down on the side of the bed so that they could see each other, the relief that was visible on her face slowly fading away. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine," he assured her, his brow still furrowed. "Well, physically at least."

"What's wrong then? Is it something I can help with?"

He shrugged at her and asked, "I just...I don't know where to go from here. The others might not see it, but you were there with me through almost everything. I guess...I'm different, and it happened so fast, and now I just don't know what I'm supposed to do anymore."

"Supposed to do? You do what you've always wanted to do," Misty told him after a moment of silence. "Keep aiming to be the Pokemon Master."

"But that's just it. I was never meant to be a Pokemon Master, was I?"

"What?" Whatever Misty expected when she woke up that morning, it wasn't this. She hoped that Ash would be awake when she checked, but she never expected him to be so contemplative and broody. "Why would you say that?"

"Because this stuff keeps happening!" He burst out, startling her. "I've never heard of anyone else running into as many Legendaries as I do or getting pulled into the—the crap I get dragged into. The things I drag my friends into." He looked down at his shaking hands. "Maybe I'm supposed to be something else."

"And maybe you can do both."

"Huh?" He looked up at her, almost cringing at her fierce glare.

"Okay, so maybe you're destined to be the one to help Legendary Pokemon, to be the hero when no one else will. But you always keep going afterwards, so why stop now? It's not like any of us are going to abandon you just because you can do...something. What does aura even do? I mean, shields, spheres, being able to sense things—does it do more?" Ash shrugged. "Well, we'll have to find out somewhere. Anyway, there are psychics and people with other strange talents out there, so who cares? You can learn with him again." She pointed at the egg.

"Yeah, I guess. It's all just so...confusing." He admitted. "Not just that. It's everything." Ash turned his attention to Pikachu, scratching behind one of his ears, much to the Pokemon's delight. "I want to go home."

"What did I just say about quitting?"

"Not to quit, just to clear my head." He hesitated. "Does that make me weak? Or a failure?"

"No," Misty said firmly. "If you want to go home to clear your head, then that's exactly what you should do. You have time to get the rest of your Battle Frontier Symbols. Everything kind of just went crazy on us, especially for you. It makes sense that you'd want to take some time to think things through." She paused for a moment. "And maybe I can go with you."

It took him a moment to process what she said, and when he finally did, he got his thoughts out as eloquently as possible. "Huh?" For the first time since she came into his room, his startled eyes actually met her own.

"Well, just while you're in Pallet Town," Misty clarified. "And maybe you can travel up to Cerulean with me before heading out to do the rest of the Battle Frontier." She blushed just a little bit and looked down. "I need to go back to my gym though. You and I both know that. But keep up with the phone calls, and I'll try to visit you wherever you are more often! And maybe you can actually take little breaks and come and visit me, right?"

Slowly, a smile spread across Ash's face as he said, "That'd be awesome, Mist. All of it."

She smiled back at him. "Things may be changing for you Ash but I'll—" she closed her eyes for a

second and then chuckled, "—all of your friends will help you. You know we will."

Her little slip wasn't lost on him, and he felt his own cheeks turn red. Things were different in more ways than one; he knew that. He didn't really want to talk about what happened in the Tree of Beginning, but he just knew that they had to. He set the egg down in his lap, rubbed his hands together nervously, but stopped abruptly when a faint, blue glow appeared. He looked at his hands oddly.

Misty saw the glow too. Her brow furrowed, and she asked, "Does that hurt at all?"

"No," he said while shaking his head. "It doesn't really feel like anything...but..." Now that he thought about the aura in him and around him, it was almost like he could feel it flowing through his veins. Not just him though. He could actually feel Misty and Pikachu too. "This power, I don't know how it'll change me. I mean, I can feel you guys without even seeing you and for a while, it was like I could sense Lucario's intentions and things like that. Wouldn't that make me almost a cheater in leagues? It's not as strong as before, but I don't know why..." He trailed off, not really sure where he was going with this.

"No, you'd be no more a cheater than a psychic," she assured him. "This could really be an asset to you. Imagine if you could communicate with your Pokemon silently or something like that? It'd be amazing. And it's legal. But you don't even know if you'll be able to do anything like that. Just go with the flow. Don't overthink. You don't do well with that." Ash smiled at her, and she added, "And about the feelings not being as strong, maybe it's because you used so much of your energy trying to help Lucario? Plus we're out of the Tree."

He thought about that for a moment before nodding his head. "Yeah, I guess that makes sense."

"It'll all be okay," Misty ruffled his hair. "You'll see." She stood up again. "Now, you seem fine, so you should get ready to go."

Ash shifted slightly so that he was more comfortable with Pikachu and the egg. "You should probably get a shower too. You're starting to smell like Muk." She cuffed him on the back of the head, and he laughed.

...

Ash felt more well-rested than he had for nearly an entire week. The fact that he could move his legs without them burning and aching was a godsend. He didn't quite feel like he did before all of this started; no, he felt better. It was an understatement to say that he was a naturally energetic person, he always was, but now it felt different. The only way he could make sense of it was that it was his body finally getting used to the aura that now actively flowed in him, as opposed to being dormant like before they came to Cameron Castle.

He already had his backpack on with Pikachu perched on his shoulder and the egg held in his arms. He walked down the hall of Cameron Castle with a bit of a spring in his step, and his good mood was noticed by everyone who passed him. He could feel small waves of what almost felt like cheerfulness coming from the egg in his arms and started to wonder whether the Riolu in it could feel his own happiness.

Misty personally thought he was on some kind of drugs as she walked next to him. It never ceased to amaze her just how quickly he bounced back from life-altering moments like they were just another Tuesday.

Misty led the way to the ballroom. Lady Ilene told them the night before (before Ash woke up) to

meet her in the throne room because she had something surprising to show them. They met with the ruler of Cameron Castle before, in the smaller throne room, but this would be Ash's first meeting with her since they left. As far as Misty knew, Brock, May, and Max had no idea Ash was awake yet either.

They finally found the ballroom, walking in quietly. Everyone else was already there, standing closer to the door and talking quietly. Max seemed to have most of the conversation completely tuned out and was the first one to notice them.

He pushed his glasses back onto his eyes properly and said, "Misty, what took you—Ash!"

That instantly caught the attention of everyone else. Brock and May whipped around, and Ash grinned at them broadly, "Hey guys."

"You're okay!" May cried out happily, clapping her hands together as she smiled.

"Yup," he said with a grin.

Lady Ilene walked by the others, smiling warmly at Ash. He was about to greet her, but was taken back when she suddenly reached out and hugged him, mindful of the egg. His face turned red, and he stared over her shoulder and at Misty with wide, clueless eyes. Brock spluttered in indignation, while May and Max laughed at their friend's face.

The blonde woman took a step back, keeping her hands on his shoulders as her green eyes studied him. Lady Ilene smiled sadly at him and said, "I'm glad you're okay. Your friends told me the story of your journey. I am deeply sorry about your loss. Lucario was here for a short time, but he will be missed by all of us. However, I am also thrilled by your gain. I know that a piece of Lucario's soul will live on in this Riolu, and he will become a stronger Pokemon than before."

Ash smiled at her and nodded his head. "Is everything here okay? Nobody was hurt?"

"We're all fine," she said softly. "There is something that happened, but it's nothing bad. Come look."

She guided him past Brock, Max, May, her Lady-in-Waiting, and Mime Jr, walking towards the throne. She motioned towards the massive painting on the wall, and Ash expected to look up to see the image of Sir Aaron standing in the pose of the guardian.

Shock rushed through him, and his brown eyes went wide when he realized what he was looking out. His mouth fell open, and he wasn't exactly sure what to say.

"Pi pikachu," Pikachu said from his shoulder.

"Yeah," he whispered.

"What?" Max cried out. "How is that even possible?"

"Oh, wow," May whispered in awe.

Brock and Misty silently walked up and stood on either side of Ash, and the five of them all looked up at the massive painting.

Sir Aaron was no longer alone in the picture. Standing alongside him was Lucario.

"We're not sure how it happened," Lady Ilene said. "But I wouldn't consider it defiling a work of

art in any way. I wouldn't change it for anything now."

A smile slowly spread on Ash's face. Somehow, this acted like a sign to him. He felt almost guilty, like he was taking away Sir Aaron's best friend without his consent. There was no telling if Riolu would have any memories of his old friend in a past life, and that was almost heartbreaking to Ash. This mural on the wall—this was Ash's way of knowing that, somehow, even if he couldn't understand it yet, everything was going to be okay.

...

They walked across the stone bridge that went from Cameron Castle to the nearby village. The air was so peaceful, the sun shining down on them with only a few clouds in the sky. Ash knew that they'd stumble onto some new adventure soon enough, and he knew that Team Rocket was probably already trailing them, but he decided not to let that bother him anymore.

"Where are we going next?" Max asked Brock.

"Well..." Brock trailed off, opening his guide book to look in it. He may have been from Kanto, but there were still many places he was unfamiliar with.

Ash glanced over at Misty and nudged her gently. She smiled at him and nodded encouragingly. "I'm going home."

"Huh?" all three chorused.

"Not for good," he assured them. "I just need a bit of a break, you know, after everything that's happened."

"Cerulean's on the way, so we can stop there so that Misty can deal with her sisters, and then we'll keep going to Pallet. You guys can go wherever, and we can meet up again if you want. You know, if you want to stop at home, Brock."

"No, I don't—wait—deal with her sisters?" the eldest of the group repeated.

"You didn't tell them that I'm coming too?" Misty asked Ash, sending him a slight glare.

"When would I have got the chance? You decided that this morning," Ash pointed out with a careless shrug.

Her eyes narrowed at him, changing into a real glare. "Oh I decided? You didn't seem too disappointed when I said I'd come to Pallet with you! You were practically begging me to come!" Ash's face went red. "I did not!"

"Did too!"

"Did not!"

"Did too!"

"Okay, stop!" Max yelled, waving his arms around. "So Misty's coming with us, and we're going to go to Pallet to just hang around? Why? That's backtracking a lot."

"I'm not actually going with you for good," Misty corrected. "To Pallet and then Cerulean. I need to go to my gym again. But I'll definitely try to meet up with you guys more, especially since you're in Kanto."

Ash's annoyed look changed into a weak smile as he answered Max's question, "I guess I just want to go home and clear my head for a while. You know? You guys don't need to come. We can meet up somewhere else."

"We'll come," May said to him. "Friends stick together when one of them is down." She frowned at him sadly. "I'm so sorry about Lucario, Ash. I know he came back in a way, but still..."

He looked away from all their sad eyes, glancing out over the valley below. He looked up to the Tree of Beginning in the distance thoughtfully. He looked down at the egg in one of his arms as his hand rested against the stone railing. He looked over as his hand came into contact with something smooth, a loose crystal. He picked it up and watched it glow slightly.

A grin spread across his face as he held the crystal tightly and turned to look at his friends. "This egg might not be the exact same Lucario, but I just know that Air Aaron and that the piece of Lucario that's with him would want this one to experience a full, happy life, so that's exactly what's going to happen. I can feel it." Even Misty looked confused at this, and she was the one who had been with him through everything during this adventure. Ash brought the hand holding the crystal up over his heart and smiled broadly, not saying anything else on the matter. Maybe nobody else understood that, and maybe they couldn't, but Brock, Misty, May, and May all smiled at him, nodding their heads. Pikachu nuzzled him, and with a smile on his face, Ash once again started leading the group away from the castle, though he soon fell behind May, Max, and Brock, walking beside Misty instead.

Ash reached out suddenly, taking Misty's right hand into his, but he didn't hold on for long. She blinked with surprise and looked down at her hand, staring at the crystal that he put into it. "What's this for?"

He smiled at her and said, "I just thought of this this morning after you left. They react to me, right? This way, when we do have to go opposite ways again, you'll always know when I'm close by."

Misty's cheeks turned pink, and she giggled a bit. It was hard to see the fierce, hot-headed girl she normally was at the moment. She held the crystal in her hand tightly and said, "That's so sweet. Thank you, Ash." She stopped for a second, grabbing his arm to make him stop walking as well. Quick as lightning, she pecked him on the cheek and then kept walking.

Ash's face went red, and Pikachu giggled on his shoulder. He reached up, scratching the Pokemon behind his ear before rushing after the orange-haired girl. He caught up to her, and because no one else was watching, reached out again, taking her left hand into his right one and intertwining their fingers, holding onto her tightly. He felt her tense up, but neither of them stopped walking. She relaxed, and gently squeezed his hand back, not letting go as they caught up to their friends, but stayed behind them.

In his arms, the egg glowed a gentle blue for a moment before fading, causing Ash to chuckle.

"What was that?" Misty asked curiously.

"That was Riolu," he said. "I have a lot to learn about aura, and I'm going to learn as much as I can so I can help him. I can already feel him. That's how I know everything's going to be okay."

Ash glanced over at her before looking up at the bright blue sky, a soft smile on his face. "His aura is with me, and mine is with him."

The End

Sky



End Notes

Cross-posted at fanfiction.net. Edited by Kimiko Heroux.

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